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ON THE WATERFRONT:
AN ORAL HISTORY OF RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA

SELENA FOSTER

A LONGTIME RICHMOND RESIDENT FROM CHEROKEE COUNTY, TEXAS

An Interview Conducted by
Judith K. Dunning
in 1986

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SELENA FOSTER AND GREAT-GRANDNIECE MARLENA

Photograph by Judith K. Dunning, 1986

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Richmond resident

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Introduction by Jim Quay, Director, California Council for the Humanities.

Interviewed 1986 by Judith K. Dunning for the Richmond Community History Series. Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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INTRODUCTION by Jim Quay

It is a great pleasure to introduce "On the Waterfront" to you. I myself was introduced to the project in September 1983, shortly after becoming executive director of the California Council for the Humanities. Both the Council and its mission of bringing the humanities to out-of-school adults were relatively new to me when Judith Dunning came to my office to talk about her proposal. Ms. Dunning wanted to document an important period in the life of the Richmond, California waterfront, but she didn't want to write a study for scholars. Instead, she proposed to interview most of the oldest surviving waterfront figures, collect historic photographs of the port and its workers, and to create from these an exhibit for the public. Would the Council be interested in supporting such a project?

Happily, the two dozen scholars and citizens who sat on the Council then were interested and, convinced of the project's importance, voted to fund Ms. Dunning's proposal in early 1984. Six years later, I now know what I couldn't have known then: that "On the Waterfront" had all the features of a typical public humanities project: a powerful subject, caring scholars, a resourceful and dedicated project director, and uncertain funding.

You can appreciate why even the best public humanities project--and "On the Waterfront" is one of the best--doesn't easily attract funding. In a state focused relentlessly on the future, the next quarterly statement, the next development, the value of such a project doesn't show up in a cost-benefit analysis. Who would care about the lives of Californians past? Who would care about a waterfront whose boomtime is passed?

The answer is: thousands of people, as Judith's project proved. First and foremost, Judith, who didn't just study Richmond, but moved to and lived in Richmond. Like so many project directors, she gave time and life to this project far beyond the amount budgeted. In the language of accounting this is called "in-kind contribution"; in the language of life it's called devotion. Those of us privileged to know Judith know that the project both exhausted her and enriched her, and she has won the admiration of those who supported her and the affection of those she has interviewed and worked with.

After Judith came a handful of interested scholars--historian Chuck Wollenberg, folklorist Archie Green, and oral historian Willa Baum--who gave their time and expertise to the project. Next, a handful of people at organizations like CCH, Chevron and Mechanics Bank, who thought enough of the idea to fund it. Finally, eventually, came the thousands of visitors to Richmond Festival by the Bay during 1985-87 and saw the photographs and read the excerpts from interviews and realized that they too cared about these people. And now, you, the reader of these interviews, have an opportunity to care.

In its fifteen years of supporting efforts to bring the humanities to the out-of-school public in California, the Council has seen two great themes emerge in the projects it funds: community and diversity. "On the Waterfront" embodies both. I think such projects are compelling to us because in our busy lives, we often encounter diversity more as a threat than as a blessing, and community more as an absence than a presence.

"On the Waterfront" gives us all a chance to experience the blessings of diversity. The life details that emerge from these pictures and voices make us appreciate how much the people of the Richmond waterfront are unlike us, how much attitudes, economies, and working conditions have changed. Yet because the portraits are so personal and intimate, we can also recognize the ways in which they are like us, in their struggles, their uncertainties, their pride, and their fates. What seemed like difference becomes part of a greater sense of who "we" are.

In the lives of waterfront people, we can also glimpse how a community grew and waned. Busy with our own lives, we often neglect the activities that knit communities together. Judith Dunning's project allows us to see what we are losing and how communities are created and destroyed. And so, "On the Waterfront" fulfills the oldest promise of the humanities: that in learning about others, we learn about ourselves. For the gift of these twenty-six lives, we can thank Judith Dunning.

Jim Quay
Executive Director
California Council for the Humanities

March 2, 1990
San Francisco, California

PREFACE

ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

"On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," began in 1985. Interviews were conducted with twenty-six Bay Area residents including early Richmond families, World War II Kaiser Shipyard workers, cannery workers, fishermen, and whalers.

I was first attracted to this shoreline industrial town located sixteen miles northeast of San Francisco in 1982 while enrolled in a documentary photography class. For ten weeks I concentrated on the Richmond waterfront, often accompanying the crew of the freighter Komoku on its nightly run from Richmond to C & H Sugar in Crockett. It was then that I began to hear colorful stories of Richmond's waterfront and the City's World War II days.

The question which captivated me in 1982 and still does is--what happened to Richmond when World War II transformed this quiet working class town into a 24-hour-day industrial giant? With the entry of the Kaiser Shipyard, the number of employed industrial workers skyrocketed from 4,000 to 100,000. An unprecedented number of women entered the work force. The shipyards set speed and production records producing one-fifth of the nation's Liberty ships. By 1945 Richmond's shipyards had launched 727 ships.

There were other enormous changes. During the wartime boom, Richmond's population rose from 23,000 to 125,000. The ethnic composition of Richmond and the entire Bay Area changed dramatically with the influx of workers recruited from the South and Midwest. There was little time to provide the needed schools and community services. Housing shortages were critical. Twenty-four thousand units of war housing were built but they were soon filled to capacity. People were living in make-shift trailer camps along the roadsides and the all-night movie theaters were filled with sleeping shipyard workers.

James Leiby, professor of Social Welfare at UC Berkeley, called Richmond a "spectacular" case of urban development. What happened to other communities over a period of decades occurred in Richmond in a few years.

Some of the questions I wanted to explore in the interviews were--who were these newcomers to Richmond and were there reasons, beyond the promise of a job, which brought them in steady streams by trains, buses, and automobiles hauling make-shift trailers? And was this destination of Richmond, California, all that they had imagined?

Other questions were just as compelling. After the war ended and Kaiser and fifty-five other industries moved out of Richmond, leaving this new population suddenly unemployed, what made people stay? And for those who left Richmond and returned home to their families in the South and Midwest, what made them come back to Richmond a second time, often bringing relatives with them?

As intrigued as I was by this new population, I also wanted to know how Richmond natives experienced these changes. In a sense, as others moved in to find new homes in Richmond, the longtime residents were losing their once small and familiar home town.

Initially, I tried to locate people who were living and working in Richmond before the World War II boom. They worked in the canneries, at the Chevron Refinery, or made their living fishing in San Pablo Bay. Most of these first interviewees were California natives, born and raised in Richmond. But the majority of the interviewees for this project came from other places--Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Iowa, Idaho, Utah--all to start a new life in California. Each one had a story to tell. Armed with a tape recorder, a camera, and lots of unanswered questions, I set out to record these local residents.

INTERVIEW SETTING

With few exceptions, the initial interview took place at the narrator's home. Because I was recording a diverse group, the interview setting varied dramatically. One day I might be in a neighborhood where residents, fearing stray bullets, keep their curtains drawn and their lights dimmed. Another day I would be in a home with a sweeping view of the bay, built by a former cannery owner during the Depression.

When possible, I recorded additional interviews and photographed at locations where the narrators had lived or worked. Some of these included the former Filice and Perrelli Canning Company, Ferry Point, Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor, and the last remaining World War II shipyard structures...since torn down. I also spent many days off shore. When interviewing Dominic and Tony Ghio, fishermen for over sixty years, I accompanied them on dawn fishing trips in San Pablo Bay. However, following a turbulent twelve-hour whale watching excursion to the Farallon Islands with former whaler Pratt Peterson, I vowed to continue my research on land.

When I asked some project participants to give me a personalized tour of Richmond to see what landmarks were important to them, all too often I was shown vacant lots where a family home, church, or favorite cafe once stood. The downtown, once bustling with movie theaters, dance halls, and department stores, is eerily quiet for a city of 82,000. I found that local residents are still angry over the loss of their downtown district during the 1960s redevelopment era. Longtime residents spoke emotionally of the city losing its center. Hilltop Mall, built on the outskirts of town and accessible by automobile, was no substitute for a shopping district in the middle of town. The struggle to rebuild the downtown and to attract new businesses is an ongoing one for the City of Richmond.

After the interviewing was completed, there were photo sessions in the narrator's homes and former work places, as well as meetings in which we went through family albums and trunks. Some wonderful photographs and the stories behind them were uncovered during this process. Copies are included in the individual volumes.

PUBLIC USES OF THE ORAL HISTORIES

From the early stages of this project, both the text from the oral histories and the collection of photographs, have been used in community events. Examples include photo panels and maritime demonstrations at Richmond's Festival by the Bay, 1985, 1986, and 1987; and Oakland's Seafest '87. An exhibition, "Fishermen by Trade: On San Francisco Bay with the Ghio Brothers," produced in collaboration with the Richmond Museum in 1988, was developed from the oral history interviews with Dominic and Tony Ghio.

In an effort to present the oral histories to the public in a form which retained the language, the dialects, and the flavor of the original interviews, I wrote "Boomtown," a play about the transformation of Richmond during World War II. "Boomtown" was produced by San Francisco's Tale Spinners Theater and toured Bay Area senior centers, schools, and museums in 1989.

A new direction for the oral histories is in the field of adult literacy. Nearly fifty years after the recruitment of men and women from the rural South and Midwest to work in the Kaiser shipyards, some former shipyard workers and many of their descendents are enrolled in LEAP, Richmond's adult literacy program, where the students range in ages from 16 to 85 and are 70 percent black.

Our current goal is to make a shortened, large print version of the oral history transcripts for use by adult literacy students and tutors. We think that by using the true stories of local residents as literacy text, there will be an additional incentive for adults learning to read. The characters in the oral histories are often their neighbors, friends, and families speaking in their own words on such topics as the Dust Bowl, the World War II migration of defense workers, waterfront industries, family and community life.

THANKS

"On the Waterfront" project has had many diverse layers, including the University of California, the advisory committee, a wide range of financial supporters, and of primary importance, a large group of interviewees. I want to thank all of the project participants who donated their time, enthusiasm, and memories to this project.

Special thanks is due Jim Quay, Executive Director of the California Council for the Humanities, who has been a source of good advice and inspiration from the beginning. The Council's grant in 1984 got the project off the ground, kicking off the campaign for matching funds. Jim Quay's counsel last summer set in motion the completion of the oral histories by introducing me to the California State Library grant programs.

Bay Area historian Chuck Wollenberg and labor folklorist Archie Green have been my primary advisors, as well as mentors, from the early planning stages. Chuck provided insight into how Richmond's transition during World War II fit into the larger picture of California history. Archie Green reinforced my belief that as chroniclers of history we must continue to document the lives of working people.

From the preliminary research to the completed project, Kathleen Rupley, curator of the Richmond Museum, has been enormously supportive. Working in collaboration with Kathleen, and Museum staff Paula Hutton and Joan Connolly on the "Fishermen by Trade" exhibition was an invigorating experience as well as an excellent example of how two organizations pooled their talents and resources to create a popular community event.

Stanley Nystrom, a Museum volunteer and lifelong Richmond resident, has been a continuing resource to me. A local history buff, with a great sense of detail, he assisted me often.

Finally, I want to thank Adelia Lines and Emma Clarke of the Richmond Public Library, Sharon Pastori of the LEAP program, and Rhonda Rios Kravitz and Gary Strong of the California State Library for their support in making possible the completion of these oral history volumes and their distribution to several Bay Area public libraries which serve minority populations.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In my work I am most interested in recording the stories of people who are undocumented in history and who are unlikely to leave written records behind. For me, the strength of this project has been seeing the transformation in how the interviewees view their relationship to history. They came a long way from our first contact when a typical response to my request for an interview was, "Why do you want to interview me?" or "What's important about my life?" And "Why Richmond?" With some encouragement, many became actively involved in the research and the collection of photographs, and began recommending others to be interviewed. "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," became their project, with a life of its own.

This set of oral histories is by no means the whole story of Richmond. It is one piece of its history and one effort to generate community-based literature. I hope that it will encourage others to record the stories, the songs, and the traditions of our community members. They have a lot to teach us.

Judith K. Dunning
Project Director

September 1990
Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library
University of California
Berkeley, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Selena Foster

I met Selena Foster during a quilting exhibit, To Keep Somebody Warm, at the Richmond Museum in 1986. She was one of the Easter Hills Quilters whose handmade quilts were featured in the exhibit. Mrs. Foster has made over fifty quilts and is an accomplished dressmaker. I interviewed her for "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California" in the summer of 1986. I was interested in talking to her because she and her late husband, Marvin Foster, were among a large number of people who migrated to Richmond, California, during World War II.

The promise of jobs brought Selena and Marvin Foster to Richmond in 1944. Marvin Foster immediately went to work at the Kaiser shipyards, but he did not want his wife working in the shipyards. He thought the conditions were too dangerous. Selena Foster got a job running the donut machine at Leo's Defense Diner which served shipyard workers twenty-four hours a day. In 1947, she opened Selena's Kitchen in Oakland and has spent most of her career working in the restaurant business.

Throughout the interviews, Selena Foster's life stories flowed as if she had been waiting for someone to ask her about her childhood in Cherokee County, Texas, and her life in California. She had a lot to say about family life. She was born in 1916, the second of nine children. She helped raise her younger siblings, and at age fifty, she and her husband brought their two baby grandnieces, Denise and Tracy, into their home to stay.

At the time of our interview, there were four generations living in her Richmond home, ranging in age from one to ninety-eight years. In 1992, Selena Foster's house is still bustling. Living there are grandniece Tracy, her husband, and their three small children.

In addition to running a household, Selena Foster is an active member of the Easter Hill Methodist Church. She is president of RSVP, a senior volunteer organization and delivers food to the homeless at the Souper Kitchen in Richmond and to the Richmond Rescue Mission. Selena Foster is a very youthful

and organized woman of seventy-six. During Mrs. Foster's rare quiet moments she quilts, a skill she learned as a young girl in Texas.

Judith K. Dunning
Project Director

May 1992
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly or type. Use black ink.)

Your full name Selena M. Foster
Date of birth 6/20th 1916 Birthplace Cherokee County, Georgia
Father's full name McKinley Anderson
Occupation Retired Home Maker Birthplace Cherokee County, Georgia
Mother's full name Hazel Nora Anderson
Occupation Deceased Birthplace Terrill, Texas
Your spouse(s) Martin Foster Deceased
Your children None

Where did you grow up? Larissa Community
When did your family first come to California? 1944
Reasons for coming To work in the Defence ship yard
Present community Richmond, Ca How long? 45 yrs
Education (and training programs) Domestic: Cooking, Sewing, Laundrying
Union: waitress, Fountain, cashier, assistant mgr. Factory work
Occupation(s) Running tag & label machines - for Dennison
& Eastman tag & label manufactory

continued on back page

Special interest or activities

Community work. Church & Senior
Citizens. Quilting. Singing with gospel choir at
Easter Hill United Methodist Church.

Ideas for improving Richmond's image:

Better jobs. Schools. Better
Child Care Centers. Housing Transportation. Closes
Shopping Centers. Less Crime lower Tax for Seniors

What do you see for the future of Richmond?

A great change in
Leadership including Hospitals. Schools &
perhaps a Better College. Hopefully a Black College.

Recollections of Family History: Cherokee County, Texas
##¹

Dunning: What is your full name?

Foster: Selena May Foster.

Dunning: Where did the name Selena come from?

Foster: It's French. One of my uncles was in France when I was born and he sent the name back. But they called me Selenna [different pronunciation] until he came home about a year or a year and a half later. So then I became Selena. It took them a long time to get the rest of my family to saying it.

Dunning: What year were you born?

Foster: 1916.

Dunning: And where were you born?

Foster: On my grandparents' farm in Cherokee County. That's seven miles from Jacksonville, Texas.

¹This symbol (##) indicates that a tape or a segment of a tape has begun or ended.

Dunning: What about your parents, do you know where they were born?

Foster: My mother was born in Kaufman County, close to Terrell, Texas. And my father was born in Cherokee County right near the farm where I was born.

Dunning: How about your grandparents, do you know where they were born?

Foster: I believe that my grandparents were born in Cherokee County, both of them. My grandfather, I know, was born right on the farm where he died.

Dunning: He stayed in that one area his whole life?

Foster: Right. That was his mother's farm and he inherited it. He died at eighty-two. He lived there all of his life. He never was away from there.

Dunning: I try to go back as far as possible into your family history. Did your grandparents ever talk about their childhood, what it was like?

Foster: Yes. My grandfather really did. In fact, he used to tell me about, well, his mother was right next to slave time. He was born in 1860. He said that during the times that they sharecropped and worked around that his mother used to nurse him and one of the babies on the farm where they lived, at the same time. He used to tell me about the type of clothes that they wore and even in

his boyhood, after he got up to be school age, he used to tell me about the type of pants that they wore.

Dunning: What type was that?

Foster: These little pants were the big bloomer blouse-like, you know.

Dunning: Pantaloons?

Foster: Yes, pantaloons. And the shoes with the brass on the toe and big brads on them. He used to tell me a lot of stories--and shirts that buttoned down the back. I can remember him telling me about a straw hat that he used to wear. He had a fight with this girl and she hit him with an umbrella and knocked the top out of the hat and it caught right on his neck. Here he was with this hat going round and round. So he said no one could ever tell him that girls can't fight because they really can. She whipped him real quick.

Dunning: That was one of his stories?

Foster: That was one of his stories that he told. About sticking up for himself. He didn't have any brothers at that time. They were separated, the family was. They were a family of three brothers that were raised up together, but two of them were younger than him. He had an older brother but he was taken off from them into Arkansas somewhere when they were very young, or maybe before they were even born, and they never did see him again.

They heard about him and since I've been grown now we've found some of his great-grandkids in Arkansas. One of the girls lives in San Francisco now. My last uncle to pass on that side died in '82 in Little Rock, and he was ninety-two years old when he died. He found this cousin of his, and through him we found this girl who is in San Francisco. So I guess she must be the same generation as I am, Miss Bertha is. But most of my grandfather's people I knew. I didn't know most of my grandmother's people, my mother's mother's people. I only knew some of them.

Dunning: Did your grandfather ever tell stories about his mother, what they did when emancipation came, whether they left that area immediately, or--?

Foster: I can remember him telling me about his slavery life. I had a great great-grandmother on my mother's stepfather's side who was one hundred and thirteen when she died. They came from Georgia with their ox train. She said they packed their belongings partly on their backs and the ox carts brought their big trunks. She told us all about these moves that they made when they migrated into Texas. That's as far back as I know where some of them came from.

This great-grandmother, Luee Harris, passed when I was seven, in 1923. Before she died I used to babysit one of my cousins. Luee was blind. She had the sense to bake and could find her ingredients. I used to play hooky and get under her doorstep to hide when the baby

was crying and I didn't want to come in and take care of it.

Well, she would tell me to make a fire for her. I would go out and get the kindling to go in the fire. Sometimes it would be wet or it would be so coarse that it wouldn't catch. I would say, "Oh, Grandmama."

She said, "Did you get a fire made?"

I would say, "Yes, ma'am, I got the fire going, grandmama" She was going to bake the bread because the rest of them were on the farm, working. I would say, "The stove's all warm now. It's really ready."

She would go in there and she would pull the door down and she would do this in the oven [gestures]. Then she would say, "Honey, you get out of here and go get something to go in there. I'm going to tan your hide."

I would be pouring oil, kerosene, in that fire and it would start just for a moment and then it would smolder out. She knew just as good. In fact, I forgot because she was blind she could smell. I hadn't thought about that. She would say, "I smell that kerosene. You poured kerosene in that fire. I don't want a kerosene fire."

She would use paper and little twigs of kindling. They even knew how to rub sticks or something together and flint, and make fire. But I happened to have

matches. But you can fool her about a fire. She made her fire in the fireplace, in the hearth, like this.

She used a kettle like that black kettle sitting on there to boil water and pour it. She stayed right there in that house and did the household chores and would bake bread and do most of the things. We would help her. She would shell peas and things like that, and I would take out the trash for her. But she cooked.

Dunning: She was a resourceful person.

Foster: Absolutely. Cooked and seasoned all of our food. She knew where everything was up in her cabinet, the way they put the things away. She would go right back there and get whatever she needed.

Dunning: Did your parents talk much about their childhood?

Foster: My mother, yes. My father, I didn't get to live with. I didn't know about him too much, but I knew about the family background, my aunts and uncles on that side. But my mother and her one sister and two brothers were reared by step-parents. My two uncles, they were maybe ten or twelve years old or maybe a little older when my grandmother married into that family. They didn't fit in with that family very good and also they didn't last long. They didn't stay there very long. They ran away. But my aunt and my mother, they were reared up there and married away from our step-grandparents' house.

One of the stories my mother tells me was about the first time they brought them to my farm to live. When they came on this farm my mother had never seen a pumpkin. One of these step-brothers, he said to her, "You take this hatchet and you cut that." They had stock there and one of the mares had a little colt. He said, "And you'll see a little colt jump out, just like that one."

She tried it. She got in trouble. The first thing she learned when she hit that farm was about using a hatchet on those pumpkins in the barn. They had stored these pumpkins. The older people in those days, they cleaned those pumpkins out and put them in the oven and baked them. They used all of their pumpkins. Nowadays we play with them. She said that was one of her first experiences on that farm.

Another thing that she told me about, there was this German man that lived close by them. He was a bachelor. He grew huge, big melons. He was just in competition with the neighbors around there. He kept all of his farm well wired, fenced and everything. But the boys used to go in there and get his melons because he would always have melons first.

He would track them. He tried to. My grandfather would get on them and say, "Have you been in that man's watermelon patch?" and, "If I catch you in there, what I'm going to do." He would even tell them this man was going to shoot them. He did say so, and he had these

big barrels sitting up in his farm, and he used to get in these barrels and hide.

So those boys made them a plot one night and they got them some burlap sacks and they wrapped their feet so my grandfather couldn't track them. They went over in this field and they got their melons. This man was sitting in his barrel, and the gun was sticking up out of it.

There was two of them. One has the big melon in his hand and the other one takes the barrel of the gun. I think he had figured the man was asleep. And he yanks this gun out of his hand, and they ran with their burlap sacks, but they didn't go in the direction of my grandfather's farm.

So way over in the night this old man he came, and he knocked on my grandfather's door because he thought it was them. But everybody was in in bed. So my grandfather, he called out to him and he said, "What makes you come here every time something goes wrong?" There were several other families around. He said, "Why don't you go to their farms. They got boys. You always come here."

My uncle said they were laying in there and they just giggled out loud, and this is what gave them away. She'll never forget. She said from the littlest to the biggest really got it the next day from my grandfather. That's one of the stories that she told me.

The Farming Life

Foster: Their farm life, they raised huge potatoes, peanuts, peas. They had huge walnuts, black walnut trees, and hickory nuts, they called them. This was what their chores were in the fall of the year was to get all these things in. They didn't want to carry so much so they would bury them.

Well, my grandfather had taken the plow and he would turn the potatoes up out of the ground. They were to go along and pick up the ones that were turned up. A lot of times you could kick in the dirt and you would still find them there. Instead of picking them up, she said, they would just rebury them so that they wouldn't have so many to carry.

My grandfather would come along and he would find these potatoes all broken and hewed over. The nice baking-sized potatoes, those were the ones that he really wanted to keep. The huge ones, they usually feed them to the stock. But they had just a different concept of what was a good potato and what was a bad one, so they buried all these little ones back in the ground. As a result, they ended up with spades. They would have to go back. He had done plowed them up one time. He made them go back and dig them up the next time.

When they pulled the peanuts up, you turned the vines upside down. You do that for a few days on the ground, shake the dirt out of them, and then they had what they called shocks. They put a big pole up and they

would stack these peanuts with the nut part next to the pole all the way around. That's where you would leave them until they really dried thoroughly. Nobody was supposed to go back to bother those peanuts. In fact, they would put huge sacks around them to keep the birds from getting into them.

They would go there and they would pull out from underneath and they would say the cattle did it, you know. No cow tracks and no nothing around. All kinds of mischief they would get into.

Dunning: Your grandfather had his hands full with those boys.

Foster: He had his hands full. Two families, you see, and they did their part of mischief and getting into things. But all together, they didn't do in those days what kids do now. If they had fights, they would not murder, and do things like the kids get into now. They had a lot of fun. I can't remember my mother saying that there was ever a family that moved away, that moved into their neighborhood that they didn't get along with. And my grandmother, she was part Indian. She knew a lot of remedies for sickness.

Grandmother's Home Remedies

Dunning: Home remedies?

Foster: Yes. So she took care of everybody's children.

Dunning: Any that you recall?

Foster: Yes. That they would make up different types of ointment. I can't remember all the things they put in it. She used to dig some type of roots she would go and get. I remember specifically one she used to call butterfly root. They would make a tea out of it. Blackhall roots, that was another one they used to use. And sage, they used to make tea out of that, and catnip. I forget now one that she used to get and she used to put it on a string and hang it up, and in the wintertime she would use it for us kids.

Dunning: Was it garlic, by any chance?

Foster: No, this was a root. It was a little root and they would cut it in little joints and thread it, put it on a thread and hang it up.

Dunning: Then would they hang it up on you, too?

Foster: No, they would just hang it up in the house to dry. Then when wintertime came and she needed it she would just break off whatever she needed and make this tea out of it. One of the worst teas I remember that they made was hog hoof.

Dunning: What?

Foster: Hog hoof.

Dunning: It sounds pretty bad.

Foster: They parched them. After they killed the hogs they would get this hoof off of the feet. That would be like their fingernails. They would be scalded already. They would put them in a huge pan and put them in the oven and dry them out, just kind of parch them. That was a tea they made out of that.

Dunning: Do you know what that was used for?

Foster: Colds and first one thing and then another. I can't think of all the things. I laugh and think about it nowadays, the things that they did rub on us. They used to use tallow in the wintertime, beef fat, you know. They used to grease your chest with that to make sure you didn't have a terrible cold. My grandmother would have a huge big chunk of that. She would get some of it and she would melt it and put it on you. They would use flannel cloths put on your chest. That was good. I've seen kids with pneumonia that just would cough themselves nearly to death. And they would use turpentine. What a horrible smell. I can remember.

Dunning: Actually, I have heard of that.

Foster: Turpentine?

Dunning: Because I've done some interviewing with Italian women, and they use home remedies a lot from the old country.

Foster: Yes. Well, that's what they use. She would put this tallow in a pot of some kind, an old pan or something that you wasn't going to use, and then she would put a

few drops of that turpentine in it. There must have been something else that would go in it. I remember. Anyway, they would rub you directly with it and then they would take this flannel and soak it up in there and put that on you. What a horrible smell. Sometimes that thing would have to stay on two and three days.

Dunning: And they would change it?

Foster: They would change it, yes. The teas that they would use, they would have a kettle like this, you know, and it boiled the water and they would put it in a cup or something and steep it. Just steam, I say, but they would say steeping it. And put a cover over it and leave it sit there. When those bad coughs would come on, coughing spells, they would give you a swallow or two of that stuff. There wasn't no sugar in it either. Once in a while you got something with honey in it, but most of the time you drink that bitter stuff.

Dunning: It tasted like medicine?

Foster: It was medicine. It was horrible medicine. But that's what they used.

Grandparents' Indian Heritage

Dunning: Do you know what part Indian your grandmother was, and from what tribe?

Foster: It was Cherokee. As much as I know that it was Cherokee. That was in and about where they lived, in that county.

Dunning: Cherokee County.

Foster: Yes. Rusk, Texas, was the county seat. From Rusk back towards Frankston, Texas, I believe was where most of her life where she was raised up in.

Dunning: Did you get a real sense of her being part Indian?

Foster: Yes, I did. I hadn't been around too many Indian people, but after I grew up--well, there was a few Indian people who lived in and around a place called Cuney. I had seen them a lot of times. But they never really lived around any of them. It was until I was really grown before I ever was really acquainted with Indian people. That was full-bred Indians, I would say, because there were many Indian mix, some two, three quarters, and some half breeds, in our family. In fact, my grandfather was, too. This is my grandfather right here.

Dunning: Oh, this picture right here?

Foster: Yes.

Dunning: Was he also part Cherokee?

Foster: Yes.

Dunning: This is your grandfather and your grandmother?

Foster: That's my grandfather's wife, which was my father's stepmother. His mother died early. So I had my mother's grandmother that I knew fully. I did not know my paternal grandmother on that side. She died early. I have a picture of her down in my garage in one of these huge big frames.

I'm going to make me a firescreen out of it, I think. I brought it out of Arkansas when my uncle died. It's she and her mother together, so that must be pretty, pretty old. My uncle's wife didn't want it because she didn't ever know any of them.

So when I was ready to leave after we buried them, she said, "Selena, there's something here that your uncle said you would be the next one to get." I asked her what it was. She said, "Well, it's the family bible in there, and a picture, a huge picture."

I went in there and I said, "Oh Auntie, I can't carry that thing."

She said, "Yes you can. I'll fix it up for you and we'll put it right on the plane because you don't have that much luggage and it will go right on."

So she sent a young man out and got some cardboard boxes and they cut them up and just padded it with cardboard and newspapers and tied it and sealed it with tape. They've never been unsealed. They're sitting down there now in that garage. I'm going to take it out. I really don't want to disfigure the frame too much, take

away the antique part of it, but I do want it neat enough to sit up here in my front room. It's got the original glass and everything on it. It's good sturdy frame.

Dunning: That's quite a heritage.

Foster: Yes, it is. I have quite a few antique things here. These youngsters that I have, they don't cherish anything like that, so I don't put them up. They would knock it and bang it around. "It doesn't fit in," they say, "with what we have."

Dunning: Getting back a little bit to your grandmother and home remedies, I'm wondering if any stand out to you regarding pregnancy? Did they have any special remedies or taboos? I know with the Italian women, there were a lot of things.

Foster: I can only remember such things as--because I tell you, they just didn't talk to children in them days. Everything was a secret. But I can remember them speaking of like this woman had young babies. Even during pregnancy there were certain places they were forbidden to go. They didn't want their pregnant women to go to a funeral. A lot of times they didn't want them to go fishing or go into the woods or anything like that because of snakes and bugs. They were always saying that it would cause an affliction on the child.

Then I remember after the child's birth very well. They must stay in a month. I can remember that so well because my mother had nine children. In her second

marriage she had seven, and me and my older sister. My older sister lived with one of my great aunts and I was the baby-sitter for about five of those children, as little as I was.

Dunning: You were the second oldest?

Foster: I am the second oldest child. My mother had to stay in bed and I used to have to wait on her. But one of my aunts would come and do the breakfast, and they did the milking and so forth. But even myself, when I was eight years old I could milk a cow. I worked on the farm and I baby-sat. I worked with the stock. I could put the bridle on a mule and work around quite a bit at eight and nine years old.

Household Chores

Dunning: I was going to ask you about your household chores.

Foster: Well, we did that, but we worked in the field. I worked in the field at a very young age. My household chores we all had to share. You milked the cow, or feed the chickens, draw the water from the well, bring it in. And everybody made his own bed in our house. Well, we shared beds because there were so many of us, me and my older sister. One would make it one time and the other would make it the next time, or if one made the bed, the other swept the floor, or if one was making the bed, the other went and washed the dishes. But we rotated around.

Even my brother, he had to wash dishes. It was just our share in this house. Nobody went around helter-skelter not doing anything. On times when my mother would go away and leave something for us to do we used to play off a little bit. We would goof around our time. But just about the time that we thought it was near time for mother to come home, everybody can pitch in and get that house in A-1 shape.

And the yard as well. We had to sweep our yard. We didn't have green grass all in the front like we have now. We had grass, but the grass was out near the pasture area where the cattle lay. If it got too high, my daddy would take the tractor home and get it down and be plowed. But we had to get out and get brush brooms and rakes and you raked and swept and kept the yard just as clean as the floor nearly around our place. Because we had chickens and hogs and things like that would wander in sometimes and you had to pick up.

Dunning: Inside the house?

Foster: Not inside the house. Inside the lawn. Yes, you had to clean up behind that. And that wasn't just every now and then. You had to do that daily.

Dunning: That was constant?

Foster: Right, and especially this time of year. In the wintertime, and when it's raining, a lot of times you couldn't do it, but when it was warm and sunshiny. Because we liked to play out there, too, and you had to

have a clean place to lay and wallow. We didn't have grass or lawns like we have now. But we had trees and swings and all of the things that children have today, but ours were homemade.

Sharecropping

Dunning: How much land did you have?

Foster: My stepfather sharecropped. We never did live on our own farm because it was very small. His parents still live there, which is my step-grandparents. So the sharecropping place that we lived on, it was huge. This was a huge big house, one of the nicest houses in the area there, because it had belonged to some real wealthy people, the Meads.

They had moved away. In fact, I think they came to California. At one time they came to, I believe, San Diego, and they came back and they planted this huge fruit farm. They brought all kinds of trees, fruit trees, apricots and plums that we didn't have back there. The type we had mostly were wild ones.

One of my grandfathers had a farm with fruit where he had brought and planted his fruit. But this Meads' place that we moved onto was huge. They had pears, apples, plums, grapes, peaches, and all of this was California fruit. I'll never forget the first little white seedless grapes I ever seen growing, they brought

them from out here and planted them near an old well that they had.

They had had a small tenant's house they call them, at that place, and it burned down so this well was still standing there. We were forbidden to go near that place. They had it covered over, but these grapes just grew wild and they went over that place.

My parents, they knew how to get them, but that was dangerous for us, and they used to tell us, "Don't you go up there. You'll be found in that well. Don't go near that place."

But we got wise to that well and we would get them grapes when my mother wasn't around. We would go in there and get us some of those grapes.

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Foster: I suppose this farm was about sixty acres, somewhere.

Dunning: Was yours the only family sharecropping on it?

Foster: Our family was the only ones that were sharecropping on that place at that time because the land was poor. It had gotten to the place where it didn't make very good crops. They had to use fertilizer in most instances. They grew very little cotton. In those days it was not worth anything much anyway. But they grew lots of melons and corn and they grew feed for their stock. Maize, and not wheat but capricorn they call it. I think that's a

type of maize anyway. Sorghum. It's a cane. They used to grow that. In fact, we had ribbon cane, the good old sugar cane.

Processing Sugar Cane

Foster: The red stock. That was another no-no. We didn't go in the ribbon cane patch until October. Usually when they started cutting the cane we would be in school.

They had this huge big mill where they cooked the syrup off, and there was only a half a dozen of those in a range of twenty-five or thirty miles. The farmers, they shared them together. They would bring theirs to my grandfather's farm to cook off. Then maybe somebody else six or seven miles farther, they would take theirs to the next station that had a syrup pan.

They would usually be doing this for about a week. They had the big mill that they hooked the team to and it would go round and round. That's the way they grind this juice out of this cane. It was really fun to see them cut that and feed that cane. They would wash it and feed it into this grinding mill, and as this team went around that would take that stock and carry the whole thing in.

We weren't allowed to come near there on account of that hot syrup and because of that machine. But one day during the season, the teachers could bring us. Oh, we looked forward to that day because we would get to drink

the juice. You bring your tin cups and there would be one man down there who would draw it up in buckets and he would bring us some. We could only come so close and he would come down the line pouring everybody some ribbon cane juice. We loved that time of year when that would happen.

Dunning: That would be in about October?

Foster: That was in October. October, November is when they would start. First they would go into the fields and they would strip the cane down, take all the leaves off of it. The little paddles I never will forget. Then they had these huge knives. I've seen them cutting sugar cane in South America similar to that. I've seen that on TV. Well, it was very much like that only we just didn't have that much of it.

After they got it all stripped down, all the leaves stripped off of it, then the men would go back in and they would cut it down with these huge knives. When you would see a wagon carrying it to the mill the team would just have to tug because it would be so loaded down. Because they had to go so far they had to take as much as they could at one time. Sometimes they would have a team of four mules to a wagon to be sure they could drag it in.

The men would sleep up there. They had these huge big wagon sheets and pitched their tents and they slept up there at that mill until they got through.

When they were through and got through cleaning up and bringing the syrup home, you know that syrup would stay hot four and five days when they would pour it up. They had gallon syrup cans they called them. They weren't galvanized. They were tin, I guess, but they were real shiny. We called them buckets. But they would have those. They would have to buy them and they would bring them to the mill in huge big cartons and they would take them out.

Of course, they had to fight ants and things like that so they would put tar or something out that ants resisted. Highlight was one of the things they used. Oh, that stuff stink so bad.

Dunning: Highlight, what was that?

Foster: It was a disinfectant that they used for cattle, something they call highlight. I don't know what it was, but it was something that they used on cattle. They would put that out to run the ant.

They would be up there those seven days when they would can their syrup up. Nothing would get into it.

Dunning: So you would get basically a year's supply of syrup?

Foster: Almost, yes. In fact, a lot of people got more than a year's supply, if it wasn't over two or three people on their farm. But one thing about our hometown, our country rural life, everybody shared. They gave and they--well, they would sell some of their stuff, but

people who didn't have much, they could come in and give you a day's work or help you, and they would share with them maybe ten gallons of syrup.

They had huge big jugs that they used to put the syrup in. When I think about those jugs now I wonder what kind of contamination could have been in some of them because you couldn't see in them. They were made out of stone. So they washed them. That was all they would do. I suppose they kept them covered and stopped up at the time when they were not in use so that nothing got into them. But anyway, when I think about it, I wonder.

They even put it in barrels, kegs, because they sometimes couldn't find enough cans. It would turn to sugar. You've seen rock candy?

Dunning: Yes.

Foster: Well, they would have rock candy in those barrels. I've seen my dad saw one in half many times so we could get the rock candy out of it, sugar.

Dunning: It sounds like you had quite a busy childhood.

Foster: We did. We had everything that we needed or wanted I'll say, most, anyway. Of course, we didn't know about a lot of fancy things or about anything else other than our rural life, so we were happy with what we had. And we made good of what we had.

I tell my girls a lot of times about Christmas time, Easter, and Thanksgiving. That was a happy time for us because we knew we were going to have new clothes and new hats and new shoes. We were smart. If there wasn't any work going on around our farm, people who didn't have a lot of help, we would go and help them. They would buy us hose, panties, and little hats, ribbons to go on your hair.

Every grandmother in the neighborhood, nearly, sewed. They didn't use any patterns. They just could sew. They made dresses if you wanted a new dress. My mother did not sew. My grandparents, all of them, sewed. If you needed a new dress, well, granny was going to see that you got that new dress, or aunt somebody. We would call all of the elderly people, "Auntie," whether they were relatives or whatnot.

Well, my mother saw that she didn't have it. She would ask us, "Ask Aunt Mary," or, "Ask somebody else if she'll make it for you. I'll get you a piece of material."

Your yardage in them days cost you ten or twelve cents a yard. We weren't big as a mouse so it didn't take but two yards to make you a real frilly dress. My grandmother did frilly sewing. She really knew how to. When they first started wearing the big flared dresses I remember my stepfather's mother, this grandmother, she made these for us. She layed an inner tube, which they used to use. She layed this big inner tube out on the

bed. That's where she got her circle from. I'll never forget that.

It is really funny when I think about it now. And then that tiny little hole that she cut for the bodice part to go over. So actually, all she had to put together was the top part of the dress because she just cut a hole in the material after she cut the circle and hemmed it. But oh, those were the prettiest polka dot dresses. I'll never forget that. And we did get the little puffed sleeves. She made those for us.

Family Photographs

Dunning: Did anyone ever take pictures of you as a child?

Foster: We had huge, huge amounts of pictures. My mother loved to make pictures of her children. But we lost all of our pictures in a fire. We had two fires. We never got completely burned out either time, but it ruined things because they used to just put the pictures up on the wall. They weren't framed. I have one little crumpled up picture of my oldest sister, and myself, and the next oldest sister, and my brother. I got it tucked away in there. I'm going to try to get somebody to do something with that for me.

Dunning: Maybe I can take a look at it, because sometimes you can have them restored.

Foster: It's just falling apart. It's really crumbling. Somebody told me that there was another great aunt that had one in Texas. I'm going to try to visit her when I go back there to see if I can get it.

Like I say, in sharing, everybody in the family usually had the other part of the families pictures, so just about anywhere you went, you found part of that family group. Once a year, in the fall of the year, there was a photographer that would come through the country and go around and make pictures. I'll never forget that tripod they had, and the big black curtain.

Dunning: The whole family would get all dressed up, and--?

Foster: That's right. We had special school days, just like the kids have school pictures now. We had special school days when they made pictures. I think twice a year they did us. One picture of myself I would love to get. I was sitting on a log out at the back of the school, and there was a whole group of us. I was one of the smaller ones, though, that was sitting on this log. I wanted to take off my sweater because it was quite bulky. I had real long hair. These girls that were in charge of us that we walked to school with every day, they were young ladies.

This girl, Ruby, she says to me, "No, you can't take your sweater off. You've got to keep that sweater on."

I got mad and I tucked my head down. That picture is a funny looking thing. I had taken all of my braids,

caught them in the neck of my sweater. You couldn't see any there.

But I went home and I told my mother, "I'm ugly on the picture because Ruby wouldn't let me take my sweater off."

She said, "A sweater shouldn't have made you that ugly."

I said, "But I made myself ugly."

Dunning: The picture really captured your mood?

Foster: Yes. I made myself ugly. They didn't just keep on making pictures. They would usually just do a couple of shots in groups. It was lots of fun.

Description of Mother

Dunning: What was your mother like? Could you describe her?

Foster: Lots of fun. When she got with us kids it was just like a barrel of monkeys.

Dunning: She had a sense of humor?

Foster: A good sense of humor. My mother grew up with us. She didn't just play the mummy all the time. In fact, I lived with my grandmother a lot, too, after she married and had her family, but I was off and on with them until

I was eight years old. My grandmother passed so I had to come and stay at home all the time then.

But my mother played with us. She wrassled, she played ball, she just played with any subject matter. But when it came time to be mommy, she said, "When I'm tired, it's time to be mommy now." She wasn't no more one of the girls.

Up until my mother died she was still just that same way. My mother would sacrifice herself for her children. We didn't have much, like I said. But she would wear cotton dresses. She would get her a good pair of hose and some nice shoes.

She used to do her own hair. She fixed our hair. She did all of our hairdressing and everything herself. She didn't go to no beauty shop. When it came time for dressing up she would see that the children all had something new first, and then if there was any money left, well, she would get for herself. But she never made herself first.

Her brothers were very good at dressing her when it came to silk and suits, and real dressy up clothes. Her two brothers lived in the city. They lived in Oklahoma City. They both had good jobs. They worked. Once or twice a year she was the baby. They would see that their baby sister, their little sister they called her, got dressed up. Each one of them would. Up until they died they were still doing that.

Nineteen fifty-three, I believe, I took her to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to visit her sister who was sick. They came over, the two boys. My uncles came from Oklahoma City over to Tulsa, and the first thing they did was come in and they wanted to buy her something because they didn't like the clothes that she was wearing.

It was terribly hot up there. It was a weekday, and out they go downtown to buy something for sister to get cool in and dress up in. Some sandals or something. She had on high heels, I think, and they didn't want her like that. I made pictures of them, and I have that picture here somewhere with them all three standing. She's in the middle of them and they're hugged up around her. I got all my black and white pictures put away somewhere in one book, and they're in that, those two brothers are.

The oldest brother of mine, he's dead now. He and my brother, they could wrassle and tussle. He was little but he was really strong. Just like two kids. Mother would swing with us. She would play ball with us.

We would all go fishing together. We would get up early in the morning this time of year. We would be on the creek somewhere, on the river, fishing. We would get up at five o'clock in the morning, just as soon as it was daylight, and do all of our chores, whatever we had to do, and get dressed in our fishing clothes and get out. We mostly had a wagon a team. We would get loaded up and have everything that we wanted to carry

with us and go in the shade of the day before it got too terribly hot.

We never camped out. That was one thing that Mother never would do with us. She wouldn't take us because of the mosquitoes, oh those things were so bad in that part of the country. But she would take us and let us stay all day long. She had us very well trained to stay away from slippery banks. None of us swam very well. My brother swam eventually. But Mother could go and sit down and be in peace. She would give us all a pole and teach us how to bait the hooks, or she would bait them for us because she was afraid of getting hooks into you.

You sit just in the lines where she could see all of us, not too far away from each other, and fish as long as we wanted to. Those little fellows stayed in the wagon, the ones that were too small to fish. They never got a chance to get near that water.

Dunning: How old was your mother when she had her children? She had nine children.

Foster: Well, she was near nineteen when she had her first child. By the time she was thirty-two, I think, she had all of her nine children.

Dunning: She was still a very young woman.

Foster: She played actively even with those last two that she raised up. And my mother's health, well, it was kind of fading a little bit just from childbirth, having children

too fast. But she regained her health. My mother moved to the city when the baby boy was two or three years old. They moved to Tyler, Texas. Most of the grown ones were already living in the city. They moved to Tyler and bought a home. They bought some land and built a home.

These two boys, the two baby boys, and the one just older than them, and the baby girl, they went to school in the city, all of them. Two of them had gone to the rural school a little bit, but those others, they never did go to a rural school. These four went to the school there in Tyler, Texas, and graduated from the high school. We don't have any college students. We've had two to go to college but didn't complete the college.

Dunning: Two in your immediate family?

Foster: Yes, of those kids. But the one boy has nine children, the second one that went to college. The baby boy, he has four. He's got two boys and two girls. The one next to him that's older than him, he's got nine. He's got the same amount of children my mother had. He has two marriages. His first marriage, these girls that I have now, these are his grandchildren. These are my great nieces.

Dunning: That are living with you now?

Foster: Yes, that I raised here.

Dunning: So have you raised them from the time they were real little?

Foster: The baby girl, Tracy, from three months old, and the oldest one, Denise, was two when I got her. They are teenagers now. I was fifty years old when I took them, and I was very reluctant to try to raise babies. But I have helped all my life like I told you. I was helping my mother with her babies when I was seven, eight years old.

This brother, Willie, he's in Virginia now. These are his grandkids, I was saying. He married a second time. His second wife is dead. They had five boys and one girl by that marriage. I forget how many grandkids he's got now. But the oldest girl, Patricia, who is the mother of Denise and Tracy, she has three children. Then Willie's got another daughter that has two, and one daughter has one--she's got two. And then his baby daughter by his first marriage, she's got three boys.

One little boy in his family, Ethan Allen, he had spinal meningitis and he died at fourteen years old. He was stricken when he was about a year and a half or two years old and lived all those years. The doctor never thought he would. But he said if he lived five days from the time that they first discovered it he would live five years. He lived fourteen years. He lived to be fourteen years old.

Oh, he was a smart cookie. He was paralyzed from the waist down, in a wheelchair. He ran a wheelchair race. He won. When he was in the hospital he learned to maneuver and get himself around. Most handicaps in

there had to stay with the wheelchair or crutches. Ethan didn't like crutches and he didn't want the wheelchair no more than he had to.

He could get anything in that kitchen that was up in there that he wanted, in that cabinets or whatnot, by taking his baby brother and maneuvering around. He would show him how to make stair steps out of drawers. He would get the kitchen stool and put it where he could get up on it and unlatch the refrigerator door. Then he would get him down and he would pull the stool back. Then he would put the stool back in the front of the door and let him get up in the refrigerator and get anything out of there that they wanted. He could make his own toast. He could do anything that he wanted to. That was at five or six years old.

Dunning: He never lived here?

Foster: No, he didn't live here with me. He lived with his father. Yes, they lived here in California. My brother just moved to Virginia this last February, I guess, just passed. His job transferred him there. But that little boy died the same year my mother died, 1975. We buried my mother on Friday and he died Saturday morning at ten o'clock. He was very ill. I don't know. I just had a preinclination or something that we were going to have two funerals.

My mother died Wednesday morning at seven o'clock and I said to them, "I don't want to rush Mother in the ground. I want to wait and have Mother's funeral

Monday." If they would have listened to me we would have had both of the funerals at the same time. Instead we buried Mother on Friday.

We had to bury him the next Wednesday, I think it was. They just wouldn't wait. Mother had called for him in the hospital. Mother lived only one month. She was sick in the hospital one month. But she called for that child. They brought him out to see her Thursday or Friday and she died the next Wednesday morning.

Dunning: It's like she was waiting?

Foster: Yes. She wanted him. She waited for every one of them. I had a brother in Texas and a sister in Texas, and a brother in Los Angeles. Mother used to be looking around. She had had a stroke. She wasn't moving hardly any at all, but she would just roll her eyes around when we would stand around the bed and she would mumble something. We would ask if she wanted somebody.

She didn't see who she was looking for so on Sunday before she died that Wednesday she was coherent enough to tell me, "I'm so tired. I'm so tired. I want you to call my pastor." She could talk a little bit.

I asked my sister, I said, "Did you understand what she said?"

She said, "It sounded like she said the pastor."

I said, "She did?"

She said, "Yes, it sounded like communion." She wanted a communion.

It was on Sunday and they were having service at that time. It broke me up so, but I ran out and I called the church and told them to tell the minister that my mother was calling for communion. He came right away when service was over with and I helped him to give it to her. That was just about the last thing we ever really got her to swallow, was that bread and wine. From then on they just were intravenous feeding. But she lived to see that Monday. Every one of them made it there.

She became satisfied. Her mouth had been kind of twisted. She smiled and my oldest sister, she said, "Look at Mother. Mother's smiling."

I thought Mother was passing. Her eyes began to move and she was looking all around. She had seen every one of them. Even some of the grandkids were there. From then on she just kind of closed her eyes. She didn't pay anybody any attention until that Wednesday. We were all right there. We never did leave her anymore because I thought she was going. But it seemed like it was a change made like she was getting better.

Advice From Mother

Dunning: Do you feel there are certain things that your mother tried to hand down to you?

Foster: Oh yes, many things Mother handed down to us. I can say some of the things that she handed down to us were what we had to make good use of. That's one of the things I can say. Be satisfied with what you had and make good use of it. She was very conservative person in that way. We threw away absolutely nothing that could be serviceable. I am the one it really rubbed off on.

Dunning: You were recycling before it was in style.

Foster: That's right. My mother never threw away rags. In the days when we lived on the farm, papers were hard to come by.

Dunning: Do you mean writing paper or newspapers?

Foster: No, newspapers. My mother's mother had a namesake. This lady lived on a farm near us there, Miss Hood. They took papers. She would save them for us and we would go to her house and get those papers and bring them in. We didn't have a paper rack, but Mother would put up a wire in the corner so you would hook the papers on there. You had to be just as careful with those papers. We used those papers around when the small kids ate. Because we scrubbed our floors with a broom, washed the floor clean. When the children ate, the smaller kids, where they eat around, you put papers down so you didn't have to scrub

every meal or every day. If she didn't do that she would have old sacks where--

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Dunning: You were talking about the sacks on the floor.

Foster: Yes. She would wash those sacks, bleach them out real white. And she would set the little children down and let them start to feed themselves. People don't let their babies start to feed themselves as early as some of the mothers did. Mother would let it have its own fun until they learned how. They give them a spoon. They didn't give them anything dangerous. The children learned to feed themselves real early.

My mother taught us about getting up early. That was one of the things if you had anything to do. I really believe in that. Get up and get whatever you have to do over with and then the rest of the day you have for fun if you wanted to, or for visiting or anything that you had to do. But your household chores were not just done patchy. Everyone tells me I'm a slave to that today. But I don't believe in getting up from the table leaving the dishes. I don't believe in stacking them in the sink. I like to get it over with.

I make my bed. One habit I have of my mother's, I make my bed before I wash my face a lot of times. Unless it's something really hurrying me. But when I'm up and getting ready to get dressed in the morning times my bed is made, always.

We didn't have a lot of clothes closets and a lot of chests and things like we have now. She had dressers, or washstands, they used to call them. They had drawers in them to store things. But you can imagine nine people using them. We had trunks, huge big trunks. She had one that was used mainly for the linen. When you washed and brought the clothes in from the line you folded those that were to be folded and you ironed those that were to be ironed and put them where they belonged. When everybody got ready for his panties or for his undershirts or whatever, they knew right where they were in that trunk, in one of those trunks or in one of those drawers.

To hang our clothes, we used to have to hang our clothes just on hooks. We didn't have a lot of closets. You just hung them on the wall on a hook. But you hung your clothes up. You didn't throw your clothes down like these teenagers do nowadays.

Dunning: Does it drive you crazy now?

Foster: It drives me up the wall. That's right. My mother's guest towels and nice things that she had, she had a certain place that she kept those. We knew not to go and bother with those things until she said so or until guests came into the house.

She had dishes and things much the same way. Like all of us, you know, we have a good set. She had things

like that when we were young coming up. Many times we were careless and break the dishes up.

She said, "Well, if you break the dishes you'll eat out of a tin plate or a tin top. You're not going to use my best things. That would just make you be more careful the next time.

Two of us were to do their handling of the glasses. Me and my older sister washed the drinking glasses and things like that. Little children just didn't wash dishes and handle those kinds of things. The larger ones had to do it.

The jobs that I can specifically remember that she assigned to us when she would go away from home was making fires--little kids didn't make fires. She taught us the dangers of fire. You heard me say we had two fires. But she was at home, thank God, both times that these happened. It was just an unavoidable fire. But little children didn't make fires and little children didn't draw water. She didn't allow that. They just didn't go near the well. So we were really in charge when she left home.

Dunning: So being the oldest you really got a lot of additional responsibilities?

Foster: That's right. But you can't find today a three or four year old child over the others, five years anyway, minding the little kids and making them behave. They don't want to mind them. But they had to and they knew

if they didn't they would really catch it when she came home. Discipline is something nowadays that they just don't want you to do. Even the teachers are teaching, but I tell you they're paying for it too.

Discipline is one of the things I can say that she taught me that I really hold fast to. I discipline myself even as an adult. But children definitely were supposed to be disciplined. They just didn't do what they wanted to do when they wanted to do it. They did what they were told to do.

Dunning: Do you think there were a lot more limits back then on children?

Foster: Oh, I do. Yes. But I think that they were good. I don't think they were bad myself. If some of the children could get back to those things today I think we would have a much better world to live in. I don't want to see the children go through all of the things that we had to. I don't wish the farm off on anybody's child.

It's fun to farm nowadays the way people do it. It's a happy life out there because you have all the modern convenience and everything on a farm. My baby brother lives right back on the farm now and he has all the modern conveniences. I go down there and spend a night or two with him when I'm there. I mostly stay in the city. But I don't mind it at all. I wanted these girls to see what it was like to live there.

They laughed and said to me--in fact, they had one of their great great-aunties pass Saturday morning. She just fell dead at the well. They said, "Oh, I'm glad I didn't have to draw water." That's what they were saying to me.

I said, "She knew nothing else. She never lived where there was running water." She had been there, visited people and so forth, but that was her life. That's what she liked doing. So that was her destiny I guess. She had a heart attack and she just fell right there at the well.

Going to Church Services as a Child

Colored Methodist Episcopal Church

Dunning: One thing I wanted to ask you about is how important religion was in your childhood?

Foster: Very. I must tell you about myself. I was in religious worship in my grandparent's house when I was two or three years old and I continued there as long as my grandmother lived. We had fire-side prayer every night before you went to bed in both my grandparents' homes. In fact, all the homes around there nearly. But I lived in two grandparents' homes where that was a must. And my mother's home. My grandparents used to make me sing the hymns, lead the lord's prayer when I was there. Every Sunday morning we were up and out to Sunday school.

Dunning: Which particular church was it?

Foster: The CME Methodist church [Colored Methodist Episcopal] and the rural. I was CME Methodist before I grew up. I grew up in a CME Methodist but I turned United Methodists in later years. My grandparents were in the range, I would say, of five or six miles from the church. We walked to the church when grandfather didn't hook up the wagon and take us along. But to be at Sunday school we walked and took all the short cuts. Sometimes you couldn't put on your best shoes because it probably was a rough route or a wet route. But I was in Sunday school, I can remember, from the time that I could read. I started the school at a very young age. So we had school in the churchhouse to be exact. The church was used for a school.

My song services and so forth, that started in my home. I had one uncle who lead a choir, one of those step-uncles, my mother's step-brother. He used to gather up all the little children from five I would say to six years, and he would teach us to sing. He would have his own choir. He would line up all the benches and all the chairs or whatever he could get out in the yard and we would have church. He would preach for us. He would make us testify.

When we were very little he would go through the whole testimony service. I had a big laugh this past Sunday. The speaker reminded me of those days when we went to church revivals. They have revival now two and three nights. The revivals were two and three weeks in

those days. And you rode to church just about every night in a wagon, or you would go early in the evening.

Dunning: And you would go every single night?

Foster: They would take us. They would put the children's quilts down in the bed of the wagon to put you to sleep on if they were late. If you went to sleep in the church they would do the same thing, put you down on the floor and you would go to sleep. But I have sat on the mourner's bench they called it. In those days the children never sat back. They were always in the front where you could be looked after so they could see how you acted up in church. I used to sit on that mourner's bench and nod. I can remember. Somebody would touch my head to wake me up to hear the preacher. I would get bored and kick on something. If you did that, you really had it coming. If you made a noise or bumped.

Dunning: You couldn't get fidgety?

Foster: No, you didn't get fidgety and can't sit. Like I hear people say now that's too long for little children to have to sit. I don't know, maybe it is. Maybe it wasn't good for me. I don't know what it did to me. I know one thing, I think it made me a better disciplined person probably. But anyway, I just knew that that was a must and you just didn't do otherwise.

I didn't like hats. My mother used to get me all dressed up to go to church and my hair was thick on my head. She would put a hat on my head and when I would

get in the church I would take that hat off and sit on it. Those hats were not made out of the very finest straw and they would break. I used to get plenty of spankings about sitting on my hat.

You dressed up to go to church. People really dressed up in those days. Those dress-up clothes were worn only just for church or when you were going to something special. You didn't have a whole lot of special clothes either. We had two pairs of shoes. We had our school shoes, we had our dress-up shoes. But the only time you might get to wear those dress-up shoes, if those school shoes got bad, was until Mother could get to the shoe shop with them.

Everybody soled their own shoes in those days or they carried them to the shop. They would almost make your shoes over again. They would take the hide that they saved from the cattle and put soles on shoes. But you wore out a pair of shoes. You didn't just scar them up and throw them aside. You wore them out. But those best shoes, you just didn't wear them. That was just a must that you would not wear them other than to the church.

In our community there were always special programs for Easter and in the summertime there were revivals, like I said, three weeks long. Then there were big conferences they would have in the fall of the year. Then come Christmas, of course, there was a special Christmas program. Every child in the community had to

participate. From the age of three or four years old you were participating in programming.

Dunning: What would they have? Plays, or songs, or--?

Foster: They would have little plays, or songs, or maybe just two sentences, but we were babies.

Dunning: They got you involved?

Foster: They got you involved. You had to do that. I see children tearing up books and things like that. That was a no-no. I wouldn't have torn a book. We put backs on our books out of brown paper. My grandparents, they could do them a little bit fancier, sometimes put cloth on them. But you just took care of books.

In fact, when I was six, as I remember, we went into our new school building. I started school when I was about four, four and a half with my uncle and my cousin. They were older and they carried me to school. So I could count and I could read a little. They would carry me to the school with them. The first books that I had, my mother had to buy those books. We didn't get free books. The textbooks in them days cost them from around fifty, seventy-five cents apiece. And maybe you didn't have but two books, and every child didn't have a book.

But by the time that we really got textbooks when I was in about the fourth or fifth grade I was carrying seven books. You had to have a bag to carry them. I notice they carry these book bags now, but they have

backpacks. But I had a shoulder pack. They did never get that fancy. But we would have a big wide pack big enough to put all of those books in and you hooked it across your shoulder and carried it. I tell you, I've walked one-sided from carrying so many books five miles.

They built a new school in our area around 1923. Then we moved out of the church then. But the church and the school were right, I would say, five or six blocks, maybe a half a mile from there. That was the same site that our church is on today.

The school burned down here several years ago. But they no longer had school there anyway because all children in the rural now are being bused to the high school areas in the district and there were not enough children in that area for a high school. There's just a little elementary school and then after that they moved them on to the high school, but they don't even have a rural school there now at all in that particular area.

Our church has been built over, I think, four times that I can remember. One of my uncles built a church the second time. The church was there when I was born. They told me the Ragsdales built that first church. They were carpenters. These were black people from Jacksonville, Texas. My uncles built the second church. They remodeled the church in the thirties. I didn't live there then but I can remember. I lived in the city.

They have a new church now. They have all the modern convenience in their church. They have a modern

kitchen and a big dining room in the church, and they serve the dinner from the dining hall now when you go back there.

One of the times I was telling you about was this revival. They had dinner on the ground. Once a year, I think it was the first Sunday in August, everybody would bring their box or their trunk or whatever their food was stored in and you shared. You spread it out. They had tables out under the trees on the ground.

The revival is a big day to have us come home. Everybody is going to come to see you, you know. We would go to church mainly to get to see everyone.

Dunning: It would be like a big reunion?

Foster: Right. That's what it was, a reunion. Two years ago one of my sisters-in-law told me she went. They went to service and they didn't see any boxes or any dinner being spread, and she was wondering what's happening. Everybody goes home for dinner. They didn't even serve at the church at all.

Family Reunions

Dunning: So they don't do that at all anymore?

Foster: They don't do it anymore! Now that's taking out all of the fun. I'm just hoping if I ever get to go back there that they would have one of those. But they don't do it.

But what they do have a lot of now is family reunions. And the reunions include cousins, just all the generations.

They're not just immediate family reunions. Last year my sister-in-law lived here in Castro Valley. She went to Oklahoma City. They had two hundred there that had come to the reunion. They have them just about every year. They take planes and, of course, they have their motels and everything reserved when they get there. But the day of the big dinner, the big reunion, they use picnic grounds. They had wonderful times, just like the old times getting back.

Juneteenth Celebration

Foster: Now, the Juneteenth, which is going to be celebrated here in Richmond this week, we had every year back there. That was one of the big celebrations in the middle of the year. Juneteenth was usually two days of real fun. The one day was getting everything ready and putting up the carnivals and then the big day of the celebration. My grandfathers all barbequed, and several other men that I know of there. They made their pits in the ground, unlike today. They would kill the cattle themselves. They would kill the beef off and wash it down and hang it and whatever they do to it, they say to tenderize it.

Then they would cook all night for two or three nights. That would be some of the best meat I ever ate in my life. And they had no ice and refrigeration. They

would put the meat down in the well to cool it, to keep it from spoiling. That's the way my grandmother used to do her butter.

So, for those big picnics, people would come from Dallas, Fort Worth, well, just from miles around. I would think hundred miles or two hundred miles. You would get to have that big reunion. That was a time of reunion when all the families would come back. My birthday, incidentally, is the Twentieth of June. I always had a birthday party. I got ice cream for my birthday.

About the age of nine I started having chills, summer chills. I don't know what it was. Like malaria. I got to the place where I couldn't drink well water. They had to boil my water for me. Anyway, I was sick a lot of times on that day, so my stepfather, he would go to town and he would buy a case of soda water for us, or two cases, and my mother would make homemade ice cream for us. He would bring the ice and they would bury the ice in the ground. They would dig a hole and put a sack down in there and they would bury the ice down in the ground. That way we would have plenty of ice.

If we didn't get to go to the picnic, the rest of the children, because I was sick, we would have a picnic at home. But they used to be uptight with me about that a lot of times. My brother, he would just refuse to stay because he liked to play baseball and he would want to go see the baseball game.

And that was one thing my mother did. My mother could really play baseball. They used to have a women's team. So she wouldn't just hardly miss those picnics. But she would fix things up for us before she left home so that we would be sure to have that.

We would have more fun. They would put up shields so that children wouldn't get hit with the ball with this mesh wire. You could stand behind that. We didn't have any bleachers, but we could stand. You would sit on the grass if you wanted to. But to be sure that nobody's child got hit in the face or anything, they would put that wire fence up, that tall mesh wire about eight feet high. That's the part of that two days or three days work they would be doing getting ready for that picnic ground.

Also, there were two or three men who would come in with their grates and their cultivators and clean off the ground. It was just a big community out there.

Thanksgiving Holiday

Dunning: Would that be about the biggest holiday at that time?

Foster: Yes. Where everybody would get together probably, yes. Because instead of having these reunions like they have today, that Juneteenth thing would be our reunion in a way. And Thanksgiving was always a big reunion day, but that was mostly the families that would go. Like I say, it would be at mother's house this year. They would go

to another sister's house next year and on around. It would end up with around thirty-two to thirty-five kids in there with them families, those three or four brothers' and sisters' children.

Most of the sisters and brothers had gone to live in the city and my mother and two of her stepbrothers and two of the stepsisters were the ones that had all of the children. My mother's sister, she didn't have any children. One of my uncles had two and the other one didn't have any. So all these cousins were really my mother's stepsister's and brother's children. But there would be anywhere from thirty to thirty-five of us at those Thanksgiving reunions. It seemed like the best turkey I ever remember eating on the farm.

My mother and her sister, we went to the field. We were picking cotton. We went the field that morning and we picked cotton until eleven o'clock. And they were cooking the dinner. They cooked this huge big turkey out in the yard in a washpot.

The big black pot is what you boil the clothes in. Well, that's what they would bake this turkey in. It was so golden brown and pretty.

They had these long benches because there wasn't enough chairs for all of those. They would put those long benches and everybody sat at the table. We served buffet style.

It was a fun group. You should see some group pictures of that but I don't know who has got them. On all of those occasions we had group pictures.

Dunning: Everything you have said this morning just emphasizes how important the family has been.

Memorial Day

Foster: Memorial time, that's another day.

Dunning: Memorial Day?

Foster: Everybody went to the cemetery. And they still do that back there, most of the people do anyway. They just have a different way of cleaning. You used to put on your overalls and your big straw hat and your rough shoes or boots and go cut the grass burrs. I don't know if you know what those are, but anyway it's something that will really bite you. You would go clear the cemetery. You cleaned off all of that and put something on the graves of those that didn't have headstones. Every grave had some kind of marker, but for those that didn't have headstones, you put flowers on the grave.

Today they still do it, but now they put artificial flowers in our cemetery, mostly because they have no way of watering them and keeping them fresh.

The cemetery, and also the site that our church is built on, was donated to the community by my sister-in-

law's grandfather, the Cauldells, years ago. He had lots of land and it was uncultivated. It wasn't the type you could grow anything on. He donated that but the community people, I think, paid something for the cemetery plot but it was very little. Everybody in the community just pitched in something, but he donated practically all of that land to our community cemetery.

His family has all died out but the grandchildren and the great grandchildren. Three generations or two generations have died off, nobody left in there. The last one died last October or November. These cousins live here in San Francisco now. One lives in Castro Valley. They are the last ones that I'm in contact with, that I know about. I grew up with them. We all went to the same school. One of them is married to my husband's stepbrother and everybody says, "I thought you two were sisters. You look like sisters. You act like sisters."

Early Schooling

Dunning: Before I stop today, I would like to ask you a little bit more about your schooling, how many years you went to school?

Foster: I went to school to the ninth grade. I didn't finish the ninth grade. Like I told you, I married young. I did all of my schooling in the rural school. After I got out of the elementary, my teacher was a man, an African teacher. We called him Professor Regor. But my first teacher was my cousin Betty. She was my father's

first cousin. She started me out counting acorns. That was my first chore was to go out. I was mousey. I told you I started at about four and a half.

So when I would start mouseying in the classroom, making too much noise, she would always give me this chalk box and she would say, "Selena, I want you to go out there under that acorn tree and bring me back one hundred acorns. I don't want ninety-nine. I want one hundred." That was to keep me out there as long as possible.

Sometimes I would count up so far and I would forget and I would have to dump them out and count them over again. So that was prolonging my time, keeping me out of the class, because I talked. I went to school to her until I was in the fifth grade. And when I went into the sixth grade I went to her husband. He taught me. He was a huge big man, eight feet.

Dunning: Eight feet?

Foster: Right. Watusi African. His hands, he could stand straight up and put them on his knee. His feet were a size fourteen club feet. That was the out dancing, out walking, acrobatic, out running man I've ever seen in my life. To be that big. I don't see how anybody that big could do that. He taught us all kinds of acrobatic things. He would play ball and tell you to throw the ball to him and he would turn around and catch it behind him, catch it over his shoulders. If you just feel about where it's coming and so forth. He learned us all these

different kinds of things. He played with us just like one of your equal. Then when it got time to go back into the classroom then he was the professor then. He wasn't one of the boys and the girls any longer.

In our school the boys sat on one side of the room, the girls sat on the other. They did not sit together.

Dunning: How many children would be in the school?

Foster: I would say, at one time, probably a hundred community kids were there. There was about fifty in each room.

Dunning: Each teacher would have fifty children?

Foster: Fifty children, that's right. And we didn't have any sub teachers there. There were just two teachers. Our home economics teacher was just a part time. She would come in maybe once or twice a week. But just a straight education. Teachers were just a professor and his wife. My cousin was married to him.

Dunning: I know this doesn't exactly have anything to do with your education, but how did they meet? He was from the Watusi tribe and she was from Texas?

Foster: That I really can't tell you, but that he was raised up in that country. I think he was born in Waco, Texas. His mother was from the slave tribe.

Dunning: Okay.

Foster: He was born in Waco, Texas, as I remember. He grew up there. But I think whenever he stopped teaching there he must have been ninety. He taught until he was ninety years old.

My cousin was born and reared right in that same community. I don't know if she was away in college or some special school, because he didn't go to college himself until after he had taught school. They both used to teach--most all the adult white people in our neighborhood went to night school to them. Those that didn't read and write, the illiterate people, he taught them right there. He taught night school in that community. My mother told me that. When she was a little girl he was teaching and he was her teacher. He taught her. She also went to this same school. Both of my parents went to this same school and were taught by that same professor and his wife.

Dunning: He must have had quite reputation. Not only his being eight feet tall but teaching for so long.

Foster: I don't know why he hasn't been in some history book somewhere, having come up in that community. I had said when I go back again, too, I was going to look to see if there was anything on his background because in Rusk County, Texas, we could go there to the courthouse and you can find out a lot of this stuff at the Hall of Records. I was going to ask my baby brother. He's kind of into that now, too, of gathering up history.

Again, our school burned and our church burned, and a lot of all of that material. We had books, from the church and the school, that were so brown and brittle that when you would pick them up they would crumble.

His library in his home, I can remember going there and seeing it. He had some books, books, books. A lot of the black history that I know about today I learned long before I ever saw a black history book in the schools nowadays. He had had these books, and also my grandparents. I can remember my grandparents had a barrel of books, black history books, when they first started to read and write.

Dunning: It would be amazing if you could ever get ahold of any of those.

Foster: I know, but I'm just afraid all of it is destroyed. This aunt that just fell dead, there were some things at her house I really wanted. I'm going to call my brother and see if he can get some of them. I would like to get some of those things so that these girls could see them and will cherish them and save them.

My education came from my mother's teaching. My mother read very well. And my grandparents started me off, and my cousins. I have one cousin who is quite a bit older than I. She was a schoolteacher. She taught me to read and she carried me to school with her on her back even before I could go to school. That's how far back I can remember in the school.

My education ended at the ninth grade, as I told you. I had great plans to go to a high school in Tyler, Texas, but--

Dunning: That was your desire?

Foster: My desire, and I was getting ready for it. The same year that I married, the Fourth day of November, I just--

Dunning: You married right after the ninth grade?

Foster: I didn't even finish the ninth grade. I quit school and married.

Dunning: How old were you?

Foster: Seventeen. Turning seventeen years old. I went to Oklahoma and lived. There was a school right next to me so I went to some night school there for a while.

In later years when I left Oklahoma and came back to Texas I moved to the city, Tyler, and I went to night school. Vocational school, they call it. I took up sewing, domestic work, cooking, and I did some math and different things like that that I had left off on. But most of my education from then on was just desire to learn, self education. I went to school a little bit since I've been here in Richmond.

Dunning: Is there a training in a certain field that you would have liked to have had?

Foster: My dad wanted me to teach and he used to talk it to me all the time. I taught the kids around the house so much so in a teacher's setting that he felt that I would really make a good teacher. So I guess that is the field that I would have went into, just straight education, reading and writing. That was my desire, to really do that. I liked bible training. I did quite a little bit of bible study. I've taught Sunday school over the period of years. Ever since I was about thirteen of fourteen years old I've taught a class.

When I went away from home after I was married and left home I went to a very small church and I was about the youngest adult there. I taught all the little children and I was a program resource person. I was responsible for all the resource programs for the little children in that church. I was there two years, a little better. By the time I left from there I had a whole smart bunch of little ones.

Dunning: So you really were teaching?

Foster: Yes, I really was teaching.

Dunning: Well, I'm going to finish up today because it is getting to be noontime, but I want to ask you one final question. As a teenager, did you have certain ambitions? Did you have a vision of what you thought your life would be like?

Foster: I can just say this one thing. I really always felt that I could be whatever I wanted to be. And almost anything

and everything that I set my mind to do I was able to do it. I don't know. I never really thought too much about being married or a family. Now some days I wish that I had my own children. But I say, well, I've been busy all my life. I've helped raise children. I helped my mother raise hers, and I've helped my sisters and my brothers raise theirs, and now my nieces and my nephews with theirs.

Dunning: Your grand nieces.

Foster: That's right. I've got a great great grand niece now. I feel like I've really been a family person. For business, I never really set my heart to it. I've had a small business. I've been in a restaurant business since I've lived here. I've been a seamstress. I've sewed and things like that. That was one of the things I did set my heart desire to do. From eight or ten years old I've been sewing and making things. I started piecing a quilt and doing things like that when my grandmother lived. She died when I was eight years old. I threaded all of her needles every day before I would leave for school. Every little scrap of material that she had left over, that was mine to sew with. So sewing was one of my ambitions.

Dunning: You've certainly done that.

Foster: Yes. I've made an awful lot of clothes. I made coats, suits. Children's clothes was my hobby. I really loved it. I did some crochet, making little crochet garments, but the sewing machine and by hand I've made many

garments. That little girl that you see on the end [in photograph], that young lady, she's in a Miss Alameda pageant. I made that gown she's got on. Just about around fifteen or twenty girls, I've made their dresses for their proms.

Dunning: Really?

Foster: Yes. They go in and out of our church. And all the children's little frilly Easter clothes and like that.

Dunning: Do you still do that?

Foster: I can. I'm not up for sewing right now. I'm just about to put it down. A lady come in here this afternoon for me to alter for her, which I hate. I don't like altering. I'd rather make a garment outright. Yes, I still sew. I make coats, coat suits, and dresses. I never did get into the millinery. I always wanted to make hats. I had a girlfriend who was into that and she made some of the most beautiful hats. I passed that up.

I said, "No, that's not for me."

I do have this one philosophy, and that is to let everybody do his own thing. I don't want to do everybody's thing. I just do mine. So I don't copy off of anybody too much. I usually do just what I'm led to do or what I like to do. I don't fool around with things too much that I don't like to do because I'm not going to put much into it.

I'm not reading as much now as I used to. My eyes are getting very poor for reading. Things move. But I stay with this sewing. But I still read quite a lot. Housekeeping I love. I don't do as much of it as I used to. But in my years of housekeeping, almost fifty years, I have just never had to do the same thing every day over again. My work has been spread out so that I get up every morning and do my beds and clean my bathroom. I do my kitchen. I didn't have all of this to do. It's just raising up these two girls here that kind of changed things around for me. I didn't always have this big a house. This is a four bedroom house. It's a large house.

My home I moved out of when I moved into this house, it had only two bedrooms but I had the dining and living room and kitchen and laundry room in it. But just my mother-in-law and I kept that. She lives with me. My mother-in-law [Mollie Bowie] is ninety-eight years old.

Dunning: And she's here now?

Foster: Yes, she's here. She's back there in her room. She is doing very poorly and she doesn't know when you're talking. She's just as liable to start talking, so I told her we were going to be taping so she wouldn't come in. But she had just had breakfast and went back to her room before you came. She doesn't feel very well. I'm going to take her to the doctor Friday. She still tries to keep that room, helps to keep it. She doesn't want me to let anybody come in. But I just have to have somebody every now and then because I can't do all this

work by myself. So just she and the girls and I live here, and the baby.

Dunning: That's quite a group.

Foster: I lost my husband in '79. So we've been right here ever since. It seems like we're making it all right. At first I didn't know how easy it would be. I knew he was going. He was quite aware of his death and everything. He had cancer and he knew he wouldn't last. But he died with a fatal heart attack. Cancer didn't kill him.

Dunning: Well, thank you very much for this introduction today. You're a wealth of information about your family. If it would be okay for you then, the next time we could talk about your move to Richmond and do a session on Richmond.

Foster: Okay. This week is ending there.

Move to Richmond from Forth Worth, Texas, 1944 ##

Dunning: During our last session we talked quite a bit about your family history, your early childhood, and your education. Today I thought we would move right into your coming to California. When did you first hear about Richmond and how?

Foster: Nineteen forty-four. After Pearl Harbor in '41 my brother, Floyd Anderson, came to live in Richmond. After he went to work in the shipyard, he encouraged my husband to come. We were living in Fort Worth, Texas. My



Hubbs 1042 W. Main Street *Oklahoma City*

Selena Foster's relatives in Oklahoma City, 1920s. Uncle Jim Sherman, Hubbard, Zuddie, and Ollie.



Above: Marvin and Selena Foster in trailer court at 1900 Wright Avenue, Richmond, close to the Kaiser Shipyard, September 1944. Also in view is the '35 standard Chevy they drove to California from Texas.



Left: Selena Foster in her new '49 Chevy.



Mollie Bowie, son Marvin Foster, Selena Foster, Richmond, 1947, following Mrs. Bowie's move to Richmond.



Lena and Henry Fort and Marvin Foster at the Richmond train depot awaiting relative's arrival from Texas, 1956.



Above: "Big Papa" McKinley Anderson unloading Selena's luggage during her visit to Tyler, Texas from Richmond in 1959.



Left: Clyde Lee Anderson (*right*) posing with Selena's sister Bertha's foster child, Texas, 1940s.



Across four generations of a Richmond household. Mollie Bowle, age ninety-nine, and one year old grandniece, Marlena. 1986.

husband was working in the defense industry in Forth Worth, but my brother wanted him to come into the shipyard.

So my brother started writing to us. At that time our travel expense was terrible. You couldn't get gasoline and we had an automobile. My brother vouched for him and was able to get a pass for gasoline for him to come to Richmond. They encouraged him not to bring me because there was no lodging at that time. They couldn't guarantee housing. Although my brother had a small apartment, brand new, they were very strict on one-bedroom apartments, only two people, and they didn't want any other families in those houses.

But we took the chance and we came on. This was in November, right after Thanksgiving, that my brother started vouching for us. So Christmas we went to east Texas to visit the family, my husband and I did. While we were down for Christmas our mail came and the vouchers came.

Right away we just made up our mind we were taking off. I had been working for families who came from California, San Diego in fact. They worked for Consolidated Aircraft. Consolidated was putting in a plant so they came there to work. They talked to me about California all the time and if I ever got a chance to come to be sure and do so. They were very unhappy with the wages and the condition around Forth Worth with the segregation, because they hadn't been used to that.

Dunning: Are they a black family or a white family?

Foster: They were Scandinavians and Swedish and some were from Dakota. One family was from Minnesota. And I worked for a German family, too. But they weren't happy with things around Fort Worth. I worked for them a long time and they used to tell me all the time. I worked day care and I would work one day a week or two days a week for each family. This one family that I worked for, the Wehmanen--we remain good friends today.

I also worked for the family of Lehmens. I just loved them. Then the other family was Pasex. They would tell me about California all the time. They would say, "Well, if you get a chance, you go." They talked about this defense [industry] in California and how people were migrating.

So we went home. We called back to Tyler, Texas, to tell some of my family about the move we thought we would make. And they encouraged it.

Dunning: They really did?

Foster: Yes. So we went down to Tyler. By that time there had been numerous families who came, but we hadn't even given any thought to it. We carried most of our housekeeping things that we wanted to keep back to east Texas to my parents and his parents. I had fruit I had canned that summer because of the wartime. I had gone and I had canned several hundred cans. We had this big canning equipment that you could get from the government and can

on the farms. We had to load all this stuff and carry it back to east Texas because we couldn't bring it to California with us. We had little sedan car.

So we moved that January twentieth. On the twenty-fourth of January we took our little trip off to California in this tiny little car. Everybody said, "I don't know if that car will make it to California or not." But it was a good little Ford.

Stories of California, "God's Country"

Dunning: You mentioned that you had heard quite a bit about California. What would people tell you?

Foster: Even long before the wartime I had friends who had lived in California, or had come to California to live. They used to tell me about the hardship of getting here, but once they got to California they liked it. And that there was plenty of everything here. They used to talk about the fruit harvest. Most of the people I knew, they didn't come for factory work. They mostly came to the harvest.

Dunning: They worked in the fields at harvest time?

Foster: Yes. This one man who used to come and sharecrop with my father sometimes or work for him, he called California, "God's country." He would just always say, "Out in God's country."

He used to tell us about the mountains and about the valley and how pretty and green things were here after you came through the desert. He said you'll find this place that looks like heaven between Arizona and California. He used to come in through New Mexico to get here. And the city. He used to talk about San Francisco. I'm telling you, I didn't know about the weather--and also about the ocean. It was the last city by the ocean.

I also had one uncle who had come out and had worked on the Golden Gate Bridge. He used to talk about it and the way he would tell it, it would just sound like a fantasy. He could sit way up on top of this bridge and look so far into the ocean. As far as you could see there was nothing but water. I had never been that close to the water and I really wanted to see that. And the beautiful colors of flowers--they used to tell us about it and bring poster cards and show it to us.

A lot of people used to say, "Oh, that's tinted. That can't be real." Even after I came to California and saw it myself I went back and I told some people about it and they would say, "Oh, I don't believe that. We would have to go and see that to believe it."

This one aunt really didn't believe it and we didn't ever think she would go anyplace, but she had a chance to come to California. She died about three years ago in December. She was in her nineties. But she was one who always wanted to venture out and go somewhere. She had never lived anywhere but on the farm. She got to

come to California. Of course, when she went back she really told a story.

Dunning: Everyone believed her?

Foster: Of course, that was long after the shipyard days that she was here. In fact, I guess it was in the sixties.

Everything that I heard about California, most of the things I heard about it, was not defeated when I got here. I found some things much better than I had heard about it.

Early Black Families in Richmond

Dunning: Like what?

Foster: The living quarters for one thing. Where we lived it was a lot different from what I had heard where most people had come from. I guess they lived mostly out in the rurals and in shanties. They didn't really live in the city.

I didn't know that there were as many black families in Oakland and Berkeley as there really were. In fact, I had talked to one Italian lady who had told me she remembered the very first black families that came to live in West Oakland where she lived at. Oh God, that must have been thirty-five years ago she told me this, or forty. Because it was shortly after I came here. I've been here forty-two years.

The people that I knew that came and lived here, they would just come here and stay for a season like I said and go back to Texas, but I didn't know any permanent families that lived here or had been here for any period of time.

Dunning: There were only about fifteen black families in Richmond before the war.

Foster: That's what I've heard. In North Richmond.

Dunning: There were about two hundred all together. Actually, they lived in many different neighborhoods.

Foster: Yes. Well, the first black families that I met on this side of North Richmond were the Williams and the Mackies.

Dunning: Harry and Marguerite Williams?

Foster: No. This was a minister and his wife. They bought right there near Foothill in Easter Hill. And the Belchers. Yes, Lee Belchers. I met her. She lived on the hill, that great big old house that sits on top of Easter Hill, and it's still there between here and Hoffman. Then later I met quite a few families on Foothill that had moved in here. By the time that my husband and I bought on South Twenty-Ninth Street I guess I had known about fifteen or twenty families on this side.

Dunning: Were most of those families people that came to work in the shipyard?

Foster: Yes, they settled from the shipyard days, that's right. I met a lady, an Italian lady. In fact, all of this old Bohman district here and over there--

Dunning: What did you call this district?

Foster: Bohman [spells it]. That's what they called it, the Bohman tract. These people were Correllis and they lived across Cutting Boulevard. These houses in here used to be rental houses. It was a quarter of a mile between the houses. This wasn't in blocks then, it was in ranches. They were families that were close to each other. I knew one old man. He's dead now. I can't think of his name, but his granddaughter is Lillian Ellison--or is that her father? They own the big house. They tell me that they were born there. Their father always lived in Richmond right off of Hoffman Boulevard, Nineteenth Street or somewhere back there. In fact, the house was facing Hoffman. It was around close to the shipyard as you go around that curve. That was one of the permanent families that had been here that I met. In fact, she belonged to the church that I go to.

Dunning: Is she still alive?

Foster: Yes, Lillian lives in Vallejo. She had a stroke in the last couple or so years. They have taken her property for the Hoffman-Knox freeway opening up there. Let's see now, do I know another permanent family on this side?

Dunning: I've heard names. There was the Williams family that was here early, and the Graves family.

Foster: I know some Graves but I can't place them right this moment.

First Impressions of Richmond

Dunning: If any other names come to you, let me know. One of the things I would like to know is what was your first impression of Richmond?

Foster: There were so many people that I was going to get lost, I imagine. I certainly didn't come with the intention of living here, being here.

Dunning: That's what I was going to ask you. In fact, I should backtrack a little bit. When you left, did you think you were going to be returning to Texas?

Foster: Yes. We had not purchased a home, my husband and I. My folks have farm land in the rural and I never had hoped to go back there to live, but we had speculated I'll say, on buying some property, but we hadn't bought it. We rented from a doctor and his wife. They had a house they had tried to sell us for \$1200. Can you imagine it? A great big lot and a house. We certainly had lived in duplex apartments in Tyler, Texas, that they had built. These were fairly new. This old house in Tyler was the doctor's old home and it had been renovated some and it had modern sewage and everything into it. It wasn't

anything I would desire to live in but we had thought of buying this property and building it over.

After we came and settled in Richmond and worked through the shipyard days, right after we got here we bought a trailer home, a nice small one. Then several months later my husband bought a huge brand new one, a great long one. Glider, they called it. It had three rooms to it. But they didn't have the modern sewage on the inside. Where we were stationed at is right where Capwell's is at now in El Cerrito Plaza. Where that store is now, I used to live there right in the trailer court. First we were on Wright Avenue, right by the shipyard.

But my space number nineteen in Wright Avenue trailer park, that is where I first was at, back over here by Yard Two.

Dunning: When you arrived?

Foster: About a month or two after I got here I would say, maybe. No, we didn't live two months with my brother because I told you we sneaked in. We had to get out of there. Our mail couldn't come there or anything because they just didn't allow it. They would even send someone around with the mailman to censor whose mail was coming into the house, and see how many people were there.

Dunning: Where was this? This was war housing?

Foster: Yes. The houses on Forty-ninth and off of Cutting between Forty-ninth and Fifty-third or Fifty-fourth. We went in on Forty-ninth Street. We lived on Fifty-second and Ernest. These streets were in there. The streets were Fall, State, Ernest, and Victor, and then Potrero I believe. You're going from Cutting that way. We were in the Fifty-two hundred block. We lived 5210, I believe, Ernest Street.

Dunning: So you really had to keep a low profile for those two months?

Foster: We had to keep a low profile. My husband went to work February second. We got to California on January twenty-fourth.

Trip from Texas, 1944

Racial Incidents

Dunning: How long was your trip from Texas by car?

Foster: We left Tyler on the twentieth of January. Four days and we came to Fresno. We only spent one night on the road and that was in Yuma, Arizona. We got there at midnight almost and we got up at seven and started out again.

Dunning: You basically drove straight through?

Foster: We drove straight through and it was snowing in New Mexico and some parts of Arizona when we first hit it.

Dunning: What was your route you took?

Foster: We took the southern route. We came out of Fort Worth into El Paso, down through New Mexico, and up through Arizona and into southern California at Yuma, Arizona and the California line, and into Los Angeles, up that way. Because this was a hard winter and you didn't dare to do Route 66 in them days, not in the wintertime. So basically this route that we took is called the southern route. I forget the highways at that time. It is Route 10 and 20 now practically all the way. I know the northern route was Route 66 because we wore out three cars going back on that one. It's I-40 now.

Dunning: Did you meet many other people also on the route to California?

Foster: Coming here? No. It was sad to think of that sometimes. My husband and I were just out there in that little car and sometimes for days, for a day and a night, we didn't stop and talk to anyone, only people in service stations. There were some places that you couldn't even get a decent meal. They would only want to serve you hamburgers or something like that.

I remember this one encounter we had that I never will forget and I always mark that place. That was just before we crossed the line in Yuma, Arizona. My husband went to get a thermos of coffee. He handed the lady a

bottle and then she said to him, "You'll have to go around there to the window, and I'll give you your coffee."

My husband said, "Will you give me my bottle, please?" We left that place. And these were Mexican people, too. I never will forget that.

We had another incident similar to that when we went back in '45 in August. We were coming back here and we came to Albuquerque, New Mexico, one of the big towns then.

They wouldn't serve us in this restaurant. We went in and sat down and they just kept serving and kept walking and going past us. I couldn't imagine what was wrong. I finally said to the lady--someone else came in to be served--and I said to her, "We were here before those people. Can't you serve us?"

"I'm afraid we can't serve you." That's the way she said it to me.

I just got up and said to my husband and said, "Let's get out of here."

Yes, "I'm afraid we can't serve you." And I never had the slightest idea because I had been raised up around Mexican people and Spanish people. All my life they were in and out of where I lived at and I never met a family like that that was that ugly.

So I remembered that place, but many times we've been back there and spent the night and stopped because it's so different now. It hadn't built up like it is now. It is a beautiful place now. But it was more or less just one long, long street, it looked like, with houses on it. I can't recall the name of this place now to save my life.

Dunning: Did that make you feel at all hesitant about continuing? Were you pretty determined?

Foster: No, not one bit. In fact we went right on up the road a little ways from there and found a nice place to go in and eat and the people were very nice. We just walked right in and sat down and told them what I wanted and they served me right away. This was the only two times I can say that we really were just turned away from places.

Dunning: Did you ever have that experience in California?

Foster: No, nowhere here after I came into California. I don't even remember seeing any posted signs or anything of the sight once we got here.

Dunning: There was one man I interviewed, a black man who came up from Los Angeles to Richmond. He found that there was a restaurant in Richmond that wouldn't serve him.

Foster: Oh, downtown on Macdonald I do remember, but I never did go there myself. But I do remember near Kresses or Woolworths, there was a restaurant there. It had a sign

posted. My sister-in-law used to work for Breuner's and she told me about it. She said, "We don't go there."

Dunning: Well, this one man I interviewed got off the train from Los Angeles and was hungry. It was his first time in Richmond and he went over to get a sandwich and a cup of coffee and they wouldn't serve him. He was so mad about it that he didn't start his shipyard job right away. For two weeks he picketed the place.

Foster: Oh really?

Dunning: Yes, and he organized a number of other people to join him.

Discrimination in Shipyard Hiring

Foster: A lot of that went on here, it really did. I'll tell you one of the encounters I had after my husband had gone to work and I was still looking for work. My husband didn't want me to go in the shipyard.

Dunning: Why not?

Foster: After his first two days and nights out there he just decided I was not going to work in the shipyard.

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So his reason for not wanting me to work in the shipyard was the accidents that had happened. This

brother of mine that was this journeyman flanger, he had seen a girl fall into a smokestack she was welding on. They never saw her again. Oh, that frightened my husband something awful.

He said, "You will never go in there to work. You'll have to go back to the type of work you've been used to doing."

Of course, I mostly had worked as a cook or domestic work back in Texas. When I left from Tyler to go to Fort Worth to live I was working for the Jim Hogg High School. I was cook there, head cook in the cafeteria. I cooked for around a thousand kids and teachers together. Then when we went to Fort Worth I did the day's work in the homes, domestic work.

So my husband said, "You go to the cafeteria or somewhere and find you a job."

To get a job in the shipyard, you had to go through the union. I went down to the union. I had been to the Boilermaker's Union. I was going to slip and try to go and get welding anyway. Here was this little fat lady. She was as large as that chair there, nearly, sitting on a stool. She was a little caucasian lady.

She looks at me and she said, "Let me see how tall you are."

I stood back and looked at her and I'm this much up over her. She could have made two of me, or three. She

says, "I think you're a little too heavy, too. You couldn't weld. You're too big to get in. You have to have little bitty people to get in and out of these holes."

My girlfriend, Alma, and I--I showed you the picture of one that's passed on now. We just laughed right in her face. "Too heavy?" We said we didn't necessarily want to go in the shipyard to get a job. We said there must be other places that we could get jobs. But for her to tell someone they were heavy it was really funny.

Dunning: You wouldn't buy that?

Foster: We really got a big laugh out of that. I came back home and I told my husband about it and he said, "Well, I'll tell you what. You go to some of the cafeterias--I've been told that they're hiring."

Well, they had these big maritime cafeterias that they just served hundreds of people all day long.

Dunning: Twenty-four hours?

Foster: Twenty-four hours a day, that's right. You could have salad making jobs or just almost any type of work that you wanted in these places. But each one that I had gone to they didn't have any openings. This girlfriend and I decided we were going to go to San Francisco one day. This was how we really met. We turned out to be lifetime friends.

We got on the bus and went to San Francisco and went to the employment office. We got off at the Market Street terminal. We didn't know how to catch a streetcar up to this place on Twelfth Street and I had no idea Twelfth was that far. There's so many short streets in between. We walked all the way. We got up there, put in our applications and we were coming back and we saw the streetcar that was going to the terminal. We took the streetcar and came back.

We got back to Richmond and we got off at the bus and were headed for home and so she said, "Oh, are you going to go back to the employment office tomorrow in Oakland?" We had said we would go.

I said maybe I will, so this is where we got acquainted. We'd been together all day long, had lunch and everything, didn't even know each other's names. I told her my name and right away she told me hers. We were living back to back to each other and didn't know it.

Dunning: What was her name?

Foster: Alma Batiste. She lived on Victor Street and I lived on Ernest. So the next day we decided to go back to Oakland. We went to the employment office and we slipped out to the Moore shipyard. We were gonna go and take welding anyway.

Dunning: Of course, you didn't discuss this with your husband?

Foster: I didn't tell my husband. We went out to the Moore Shipyard and there was this white fellow. He was from Oklahoma. He was training the girls. He was very biased and prejudiced. He was trying all the little ones.

Dunning: Were there black and white women at that time or did you mostly see--?

Foster: There were blacks out there but mostly the white girls were the ones who got all the training. They all had to wear the same welding suits because this was a training outfit. So they would just try them for so many minutes, and then they would try the other. We tried the whole day to get fitted. Other girls kept coming, white girls. Alma was kind of chubby but she wasn't fat and at that time I only weighed about a hundred and ten, and it seems that we were too big. This was just prejudice.

Finally, about three-thirty we gave it up. We decided we weren't going to go back. We could see what was happening and we weren't going to go back there any more. We came home. I said to her, "Well, I'm going to set out tomorrow to look for me a job in a cafeteria. I think I can get me a job in a cafeteria."

Job at Leo's Defense Diner

Foster: Right across the street from Yard One my husband worked in prefab. He had been eating at this Leo's Defense Diner, 501 at Cutting. He came back telling me about

the girls that bussed dishes and washed dishes in there and the cashiers and the fountain girls.

He said, "You should go down there and talk to some of those girls and you might get on. They work awfully hard and they don't look like they have enough help there. And they have a night shift."

He saw a sign that said they needed a fry cook. So okay, I go down and talked with Leo and I got the job. So I go to work at nine o'clock at night. Before the first night that I went to work I went home and I had nice white uniforms and everything because that's the kind of work I had been doing anyway. I dressed and I went in. I even had my caps.

There was a fountain in there. I had went in to fry cook, but the fry cooking slowed down and I would work in and out of the fountain and help this little girl there. Incidentally, she was from Fort Worth, Texas, where I had just come from. She had worked in the Walgreen's drug stores back there at a fountain. She taught me the fountain work along with my fry cooking. I only fry cooked two nights. She was getting ready to leave to go back to her home on vacation. Mrs. Lockshin saw me in the fountain working with her--

Dunning: Mrs. Who?

Foster: Lockshin. That was Leo's wife. Her name was Mary.

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So Mary said, "Leo, I really like that girl you've got on the fry cook for nights. I would like to have her on the fountain because I think she would make a better fountain worker than the little girl that's leaving, going on vacation." This girl didn't intend to come back anyway, but she hadn't told them.

The next morning Leo approached me and asked me did I think I could do that fountain work--they had this donut machine in there--and learn to run that donut machine. I said, "Oh yes, I'm sure I could."

That day I worked with this girl. She hadn't left yet. I made milkshakes and served coffee and donuts all day. She ran the donut machine but I would work in and out helping her. She would show me how. A couple of times I went back to mix the dough because there was someone in the kitchen to help me.

She came in during the day, Mrs. Lockshin did, and saw me on the fountain. She came over and talked to me and she asked me, "You like this kind of work?"

I said, "Yes, I really do. In fact, this is the type of work I've been used to doing." I hadn't run the donut machine.

I can't recall this child's name right now, but she said, "If she leaves for vacation, can you take this over? Do you think you can handle it?"

Of course, I had a lot of girls that worked under me, but she wanted me to take it and manage it. So I said, "Yes, I think I could."

She said, "Now I'll make you the head girl and you would be over the rest of the girls. You just tell them what to do. You won't have all the work to do but you'll have to be responsible to see that it gets done."

I worked on the cash register with her that day. Another thing is that everybody had to work the cash register because nobody had time to take your customers and your change. Only in the food line, and they had two cashiers over there. So I said, "Okay. Well, I have to talk to your husband about who's going to fry cook tonight."

Mrs. Lockshin said, "I'll take care of that. Don't worry about that. There'll be somebody to take that place over there." So at three o'clock she told me, "You will be managing. You'll have this job tomorrow so you come in at five o'clock in the morning and I will have someone to come in and mix dough for you tomorrow on the donut machine and help you. But you'll have to run the donut machine."

I tell you, I've ever seen so many donuts. I told them I don't think after this war was over I would ever eat another donut, let alone make one. I worked there from that second day or third day that I was on that job.

Dunning: How long had you been in California and Richmond at that time?

Foster: At that time? That was my first job I landed. My husband went to work February Second, and I think I went to work the Second or Third of March. I was here a little over a month before I got a job.

Dunning: Were Leo and Mary Lockshin white?

Foster: No, they're Jewish. They live here in Richmond. Mary's folks were original San Franciscans, but Leo migrated into this country from China, so he's Chinese and Jewish mixed, Russian and Chinese and Jewish.

Mary came from a family that was quite well-to-do and had their own business in San Francisco for years. Her mother died here in Richmond with her. Her mother established them in the shipyard business. You remember that old streetcar that was there?

Dunning: No, I don't.

Foster: Well, they had an old streetcar that could have been an old Pullman car. They had converted it into a restaurant and they added on to it. They had the dining section and then the kitchen area where the counter and the fry cook and all of that was down below. That was added on. The fountain area where I worked at, that was added on. Of course, on the back they had a huge storage area, and then on one end of it they had a canteen. Later, Leo built a grocery store up on the other end of it and a

fruit stand. They had that whole block, they took it up. And for all the help that came there and would stay with them for a month or six weeks or longer, they gave them permanent jobs.

I had a couple of prejudiced incidents happen there with help coming in. Leo would come in and sack them right out of the place, send them out.

Dunning: The help was a mixed group?

Foster: Yes, the help was all mixed.

Dunning: But there was help that would be nasty to you?

Foster: Yes. In fact, I had one woman, she was older, and she came into the fountain one day just wandering around. She was the overseer where the fry cooks and the cashiers were. But she was wandering around and picking and meddling. She came over to my counter, over to the donut counter and the fountain area to get something. I was frosting donuts. I was putting chocolate on. Her name was Helen.

She wanted to know if she could have a donut. I said, "Yes, but I would prefer if you would frost your own. There's the frosting, frost your own."

On the table beside me there was twenty-nine cents. Milkshakes were twenty-one cents, and if you got a malt it was twenty-five cents, just the difference. One young

man had come and bought a milkshake. I fixed the milkshake and set it up for him.

I gave him his change, laid it down, and he said, "Oh, just keep the change. Never mind."

He didn't come back and get it so it was laying on this table. She was eating her donut and wandering around and she finally said to me, "Honey, if I were you I wouldn't lay the money around like this. I would put it in the cash register."

I looked around at her and said, "And if it was meant to have been in the cash register it would be in there. That young man bought a milkshake and he left it. He told me to keep the change. I layed it there on the table because I working in this chocolate."

So no more was said about it. That evening when the boss came in, she told him I had gone home. She told him that I was taking the change from the cash register.

The next morning when I came in I had this whole group of men that came from the shipyard every morning to buy donuts to take to their group. They would come and get like twenty-five and thirty dozen donuts. I was just busy trying to get their donuts ready for them that morning and fixing the coffee thermos and everything.

I got this yell out from Leo to come over to his side of the counter. I said, "I'm real busy right now. Just as soon as I finish serving my customers."

So he yells out again, "What's this I hear about you not ringing up all the money or taking tips from somebody?"

Dunning: He said that out loud in front of everybody?

Foster: Right out loud in the presence of everybody. But did he ever get ridiculed for that, and so did she. One of these men, a little fellow, he was from Minnesota, that I knew, one of these leadermen. He was a white fellow. He goes, "Boo!" to him. He says, "And so what? As hard as she works every day, I'm going to give her tips if I have to put them in her pocket myself. Let the woman get through serving us here before you start this. What's going on?"

So Leo goes on to say that this Helen had said that. Then she looks just as sheepish and coward and she goes into the kitchen. I finished serving my group, got the men off to work, because they would have the break time but the men couldn't leave their jobs. When they had coffee breaks he would serve them their coffee and donuts over by the ship. As he went out and everybody was finished then, there still was a whole group of them jeering back to him. White and black, oh, they gave him the devil. They berated him.

I finished up and I went into the back. I cut the donut machine off and I went back there to Leo's office. I really read him off.

I asked him, "Who said this? I know who told you this. I explained to Helen what had happened."

Leo said, "From now on, if anybody gives tips, put them in a glass and at the end of the day we'll divide them or do something, but all money should be put in the cash register."

I said, "If it had belonged in the cash register, I would have put it in there. For twenty-nine cents, if you feel that way about me and I've been in there handling hundreds of dollars of yours all day every day, I'll give you this job right now."

I started taking my apron off and everybody started yelling, "Don't quit, don't quit."

I said, "Oh, but I must. I can't stand this any longer."

By this time Leo's wife had come in and she had something to say about it. He was kind of calming down. He had said, "If we got tips, put them in the glass at the end of the day."

But then she started and wanted to know then why would this fellow single out me. No one else had ever taken tips in the place, she said, and I knew that was far from the truth because over on the side where this woman worked at they gave dollars for tips. Because we really did serve them every morning. We would make lunches for a whole group of men, special lunches, too,

because meat was rationed at that time. We would put a pork chop on the fire and pretend that it was broiled and put it in the bread and they would carry them to their homes, because you had to have points to buy this meat. When the men would come out of that shipyard in the morning and on the way home they would come by there and eat their breakfast and get a scotched pork chop, they called it, and take it to their home to cook it. And they got tips for that, those women did over there on that side, dollars.

They weren't taking it. The men gave it to them. It wasn't for Leo, it was for them. They paid for the pork chop, but they would pay them to do that. I said, "Now the tips are really taken on the other side there if you want to know who really gets tips, and I know about it so don't tell me no one else ever takes tips around here. And out in the canteen, too. I know the girls get good tips out there, because they fix special lunches and things like that."

They had cigarette lines, and they had stocking lines. If you could see to it that somebody got something, that way you would get a tip. They would tip you good, too.

Money wasn't as plentiful as it is now. You didn't make as much money. But people didn't have anything to do with their money in a way of speaking. Some people were saving, but you didn't go anywhere to spend your money. You didn't have time.

Dunning: So busy working.

Foster: Right. And they just would tip you well. Anyway, I took off my apron and I said to him, "I would like to get my check--I'm leaving."

Then Leo starts begging me to stay and all the whole staff in the kitchen and everybody came in after me. But I went out behind his wife and followed her all the way back up in the grocery store and me and her really had it out. Then I said I'm not going to come back. But Leo begged me to come on back, come to work because he didn't have nobody to run the donut machine the next morning.

Dunning: Because nobody but you knew how to run it?

Foster: That's right. I finally reconsidered to her. I said "But under one circumstance, I have to tell you. You have to apologize for what you said to me--I have a husband, and nobody singled me out to give a tip to. I want you to know that right now. No one was fresh with me in any way and for twenty-nine cents especially." I got real indignant with her just like she had done with me.

Dunning: Was that implied?

Foster: No, but the way she said it, why single me out to give me a tip--you know. I don't know if she was thinking just what she said. But anyway we got to be the best of friends over the period of years. I really liked to work for them. She changed her attitude towards me. She was

the one that singled me out to be the best person, the best helper she had in that place.

Dunning: About how many employees were there?

Foster: There were three shifts so it's hard for me to tell you, but a hundred or more probably.

Dunning: Really? So there would be about thirty on each shift?

Foster: Probably so, yes, because people worked in all departments. The kitchen help, they had potato peelers and bean cooks and soup cooks and they had their head cooks. They had groups who didn't do anything but just peel potatoes because we served potatoes with everything. They had a potato peeler and then they had to peel by hand. It was french fries or hash browns all day long with everything.

That was the main meal in them days. Like I said, meat was rationed, but you could get meat for the defense like that, he could. People couldn't get meat at their homes. So they would come in and order food a lot of times and then take it out. You would have to have it fixed there but you could take it out. On their main dinner line there were eight or nine people working.

People came down the line like they do in the cafeterias now and pick up what they wanted, but you had to have people just replenishing and keeping it stocked. They had people there all the times because the line never stopped. From five o'clock in the morning when we

first opened up, the breakfast shift was coming through and going to work, and then at seven o'clock they came out of the shipyard and came right back so the line never stopped. They were just backwards and forth all the time.

Membership in the Culinary Union

Dunning: Could you give me an idea of a typical day for you at Leo's Defense Diner?

Foster: My schedule was from five o'clock in the morning, eight hours if I could get off in eight hours. A lot of times I had to stay there overtime until it quieted down. We were unionized.

Dunning: What union was it?

Foster: Culinary workers.

Dunning: As soon as you were in there you joined the union?

Foster: Yes. I had to join the union just as soon as I got the job. In fact, you had to join the union before you got the job. They let me come on the work, but I had to go right down and join the union. Most of the time the union sent the help there. But if Leo found someone that he liked well enough and someone with experience, he would just hire them right off the bat himself.

Dunning: Even though they weren't in the union?

Foster: No, but he was assuring that they would get in the union. Every now and then they would have a fight about picking up somebody but I didn't get into any kind of fight that way. I went right on through. They didn't bother me. I have known them to pull people off of dishwashing jobs where they had people on the waiting list.

They hired more dishwashers. I have to say so. That was the one thing that was rotating all the time, was dishwashers, because it was hard. Those people had to work and the dishes were heavy. And if the load got heavy, either somebody was off or something like that, the other person had to pick up the slack and even go out and help bus dishes sometimes. It was rough on them.

This one lady there, her name was Annie. She was stout. She was a white lady from Oklahoma. She was the best dishwasher I had ever seen. That lady could wash dishes, I am telling you. When she was on dishwashing we were never without dishes. But many of the others would get so far behind sometimes you would have to run out and go up and help the busgirls rake them up and help get out a stack of dishes. But Miss Annie could do them dishes--she really could. She was in her fifties, too. She was an older woman.

Dunning: Do you think there were other women that worked there because their husbands didn't want them to work in the shipyards? Did you ever get that impression?

Foster: There was one other lady I knew. Her name was Clara Carter. Her husband didn't want her to work in the shipyard. She just didn't even buck against him at all. She just went right on. She was able to get into the kitchen, too, real early. That's the only person that I really know for sure.

Dunning: It sounds like you were working as hard as people did in the shipyard, if not harder.

Foster: I'm telling you, because those people in the shipyard, they had breaks and goofed off. But I tell you, I went without my meals many a day. Just as soon as I would sometime think I had a break, fix me a milkshake or go over and get me an egg fried or something to sit down and eat--I hated those donuts--just when I would get started with my plate in would walk somebody and I would have to jump up.

Many times the boss used to eat my food. He used to just lay around to get to eat my dinner after I had fixed it. He said, "That's all right. It won't go to waste. I'll eat it for you." He would come right in and get my plate a lot of times. He would say, "Well, we won't let this go to waste Selena. You'll get another one further on up the line."

That's how he ate on the run most of the time. He wouldn't stop to fix himself anything to eat, but if he would catch me or any of the other girls that had just sat down with a plate, he would get it.

But typically I would get busy and it didn't bother me too much to work straight through. I would rather be busy than standing around.

Dunning: You would go in at five a.m. and start the donuts? Would you have to make the dough?

Foster: Yes, I'd have to mix the dough and start that. Sometimes if the head cook would get in there earlier, like four-thirty, he would mix my first batch for me and put it up, because he had to turn the machine on to get the grease hot. But if he had the dough fixed, just the minute I got there I would hit the level and start the machine going. The donuts, they had a rotation or a circulation of about maybe a dozen or maybe two dozen donuts. By the time they got through falling and going around this, when they made it back to the doorway to dump the donuts out, the first ones were ready.

Dunning: I don't think I've ever seen a donut machine. What does it look like?

Foster: This was a big iron thing. It had little spaces where the dough dropped in and this level that worked up and down. It would go up like this, push out the dough. That's one donut. Up, down, up, down.

Dunning: Would there be holes in these donuts?

Foster: Oh, yes. By the time this thing filled a donut ring going around like that the first donut that fell would be ready. They would go about halfway around and they

would flip. They turn over. When they turned over they would sink down, and when they raised back up to the top it would be right at the door and pitch them out. It was really a fascinating thing to see one work like that.

I had a long iron rod that I would stand there with. They came out on this conveyor, and I had to scoop them up by the dozen. I would just run my iron at them, dump them out on the trays because they would really be too hot to hold.

We had powdered sugar. We had chocolate, we had caramel, and granulated sugar with cinnamon in it, and you would just roll them in that. Most of the people that wanted them hot, they just wanted granulated sugar or powdered sugar on them and they would take them and go. But the ones that wanted them coated with chocolate or caramel, they would have to let them cool before you could do that, just like you see them in the donut shops now.

I tell you I must have made two hundred, three hundred dozen donuts or more twice a day. I did them from five o'clock in the morning until eleven. As soon as the lunch period was over with I started back up from one and went to three o'clock. If there wasn't any in the showcase at three, I would have to make some more, because I had to leave donuts in the showcase at night. They would buy them all day long, come in and have donuts and coffee. They would make an ice cream and donut sundae.

Dunning: I've never heard of such a thing.

Foster: You just take a donut and dump a scoop of ice cream on top of it and sometimes put chocolate syrup or some strawberries up over the top of it. Yes, they have donut sundaes. We had a little slogan up on the wall. It said, "As you ramble through life, brother, whatever may be your goal, keep your eyes up on the donut, and never on the hole." I'll never forget that as long as I live.

I said, "Well, I'm going to turn my eyes away from the donuts once I get out of here." I did, too. I hated those donuts with a passion. Now I have this job at Hunt's quality donut place where I pick up donuts for my mission.

Volunteer Work for Richmond Rescue Mission

Dunning: For the Richmond Rescue Mission?

Foster: Yes, the Rescue Mission, and then I have two or three other little missions that I drop them off to, and when there's a bereavement in families, I take donuts to them, or if I know of people with little children, I carry them when I have an awful lot of them. Like Monday night I had sixty-one dozen. I had to pack them all by myself. I didn't carry any help.

Dunning: Were these surplus donuts?

Foster: They're at the end of the day. They're fresh donuts. But they have to pull the showcase at closing time.

Dunning: And then you deliver them to different places?

Foster: I take them right straight to Rescue Mission. Occasionally I drop a boxfull for the blind institution. But when I carry them to Rescue Mission they distribute them out. They feed hundreds of people up there, plus the Food Pantry uptown and one or two other organizations that they know about. They send them out to them. I have known them to put them out on the sidewalk and just let the people come by and get donuts.

Dunning: Did you initiate that?

Foster: Yes, I did.

Mr. Malcolm Lee at the Richmond Rescue Mission would tell us about people that were in need or they had families they had to turn away because they didn't have any place for them to feed them. We must have been doing this now for well over fifteen, sixteen years.

Accidents on the Job at the Diner

Dunning: I would like to go back a little bit to your work at Leo's Defense Diner. Do you have any other recollections that you would like to talk about?

Foster: One of my recollections I cannot forget. I almost lost my finger there [laughs]. I cut the whole top of that finger, nail and all, off and just barely hit the bone. I was getting shortening to put in the donut machine. Someone had taken a slicing machine and they had the guard off. It was an old one, and they put it under a cardboard box. It had this seam in the middle of it, this cardboard box did, and that blade came right up through that seam and I sat this shortening pot on top of that box not knowing that thing was under there. As I began to fill the pail it got heavy. I was putting somewhere around fifteen or twenty pounds in it. It gave way and I was falling. I lunged to catch it and my hand hit that blade and the blood just spewed. Oh my, and I upset the whole place. That was one incident I won't forget.

Dunning: Who took care of you?

Foster: We had first aid on the place, but anyway I was on Kaiser plan so as soon as they got it stopped from bleeding pretty well I ran on up to Kaiser. That was a bad experience. I sat there for I don't know how long.

Twice I got injured. I got cut with a beer bottle here. Two incidents at Kaiser. The doctor finally came to see about me. He never thought a thing about trying to numb the finger or nothing. He just came and he grabbed it and he starts probing to see what was in it.

I yelled out to him, "Is this a veterinary hospital? I would like you to work on the horses or dogs. Turn my

hand loose. That's been cut now for an hour and a half or two hours and that thing is really hurting and sore." Where the glass was in there, he catches my thumb and pulls it back and all of this--you can see the scar in here--was just layed back. I dropped a bottle of ale.

Dunning: Was this at the diner?

Foster: At the diner. And the bottle exploded. That green glass just hit that hand. My line was just like this for serving lunch. I grabbed a tea towel and wrapped on it. I was trying to hold it there. I was working on the cash register. The beer was right under the cash register. I leaned down to get this and I got two bottles with one hand. One slipped out of my hand and that's what happened. I had had the other hand on the cash register at the time, but the guy asked for ale and I leaned down to get the ale and that's what happened.

I helped the tea towel there and finished out the line. By that time this towel was soaked. I rushed on out and went up to Kaiser. Somebody punched me out on the clock. There was nobody there with a car. My car wasn't there, I remember. I walked from Fifth and Cutting up to Fourteenth Street to that hospital. I had to sit again that same kind of way, but this same doctor didn't wait on me that day. But the doctor that came out to do it, he was slow and he's the one that pulled this and I yelled at him.

My other experience at that cafeteria was with the chef, and I never will forget. We had a gypsy fellow

come in. He was wild and woolly and yelled. He worked in the shipyard. I believe it was Gypsy Pete they called him.

He came in there one morning and he put his fingers in his mouth and he was whistling at the chef, "All right there, get busy, get the breakfast together. Get me up so-and-so."

The chef was in the bad mood that morning, on the wrong side, and he turned around and he used some language I am telling you on that gypsy fellow and told him he would take the cleaver and jump over the counter and chop his neck. It frightened all of us almost to death. The chef said, "Don't you ever whistle at me again."

He was pointing his finger by this time and the fellow was laughing. He said, "I'm in no so-and-so laughing mood." He had this cleaver in his hand and all these men in the line began to run back and push this guy. It frightened all of us near half to death. But we got behind in the line.

The boss wasn't there, thanks be to God. Anyway, when he did come in we were struggling trying to get these people out of the place because we had lost some time. That was a bad experience that morning and I just knew that he would fire the chef cook, but he didn't even say anything to him. He came in and cursed the gypsy fellow out himself, you know, about coming in and carrying on like that. That's one thing, Leo would go

to the defense of workers if someone came in abusive like.

Postwar Employment in the Restaurant Business

Foster: Later, I worked for the chef cook and a fellow by the name of Warner in the cafeteria. I was getting ready to open up a place of my own in Oakland. I had a little cafeteria on the corner of Lead Market, and Twenty-Fourth Street in Oakland. I worked for them up until I got my little place open because they were closing down gradually and I didn't like it because they had that bar there and oh, the people that they had coming in and out of that bar were undesirable for me.

Dunning: This was after the war?

Foster: Yes. Leo had put this bar in there and he rented to them. He didn't run the bar but he rented it to these fellows. About two years or so after I went to work I had my own little place in Oakland. I went to work for Capwell, Sullivan, and Furth down at Oakland.

Dunning: What are they?

Foster: It was a department store just like Capwell's. It was a branch, I guess, of that Capwell's, but it was a partnership thing. Sullivan and Furth were in with Capwell's in this place. I worked there at the fountain and as a cook for almost two years.

In 1952 I had surgery. I stopped work. I didn't work for quite a while. In the fall of '52, winter really, my husband and I both were piled up there in the house. He fell and broke his ankle. Leo came to that service station there by my house one day. I was on the corner of Hoffman and Twenty-ninth. He was there in that service station and he remembered that we lived there. So he jumped out and came and knocked on the door.

I was sitting in the living room and my husband was sitting there with this cast on his leg, propped up, and he was peeping in the window from the porch. He saw us and he knocked on the door and called me by name. So I went to the door and he called me, "Grandma, what's the matter with you, getting around like that?"

I said, "Oh, I'm sick. I've been in and I had surgery really."

He said, "You and Marvin both piled up here? What's the matter with you?"

I said, "He broke his ankle."

He said, "Oh, you got a hospital in your home, huh?" So he said, "Can you work?"

I said, "Well, I haven't started back to work yet. I plan on going to work."

He said, "What could you do now?"

I said, "I don't know. I would have to get cleared out from the doctor before I can go back to work."

He said, "I've got a good little job for you. I've opened up a place in San Francisco in the financial district. I need a coffee girl and salad and cashier. The people come in there and mostly order their lunches right from the salad bar, but I need somebody to draw coffee, keep it made, and to take their change." They did serve lunches there, but then he had the lunch crew that came on. They would come out of the kitchen and serve the lunches when hot meal time came.

He said, "I'd give you that job if you would come over there. I'll start you off at a good salary."

So I said, "What do you call a good salary?"

He said, "Oh, not being in a union, how would \$12 a day sound to you?" That was pretty good at that time. He said, "And I'll even give you transportation. I'll pick you up and carry you in the morning and Mary will bring you back in the evening, so you won't have to ride the buses."

I said, "Well, maybe. I have to think about it a day, but anyway I have to get cleared from my doctor. I'll call up and find out when I can get an appointment and I'll get cleared."

He said, "I would really like to have you Monday morning if I could." This was about Tuesday or Wednesday.

Sure enough, I went to Dr. Ross. That was my doctor, Elsie Ross. She said, "Well, I don't see any reason why you couldn't do that now. I would just be careful about stairways or anything like that. And I wouldn't do an awful lot of walking and no lifting."

I called Leo back and I told him she said yes. He said, "Okay, I'll pick you up Monday morning at seven o'clock. After that you can come in at nine, but I have to be there at seven."

So I went in with him that morning and he showed me around the place and the only steps they had was about six or eight steps and they were pretty straight down, though, in a basement. That's where they had to dress at.

I said to him, "I can't go down there." We had to wear uniforms.

So he said, "Well, I'll tell you what you do. You take your uniform home with you and come in with your uniform on."

So that particular day I dressed in the kitchen. After that I would go in and I would already be dressed when I got to work. He carried me for about six weeks and I would have to go in that early hour. I got tired

of that and I finally decided I was going to ride the bus. I worked out over there about eight or ten months.

Then I quit that job. After that job I was home for about six months. My sister started to work in a room and boarding house. They call them guest houses in San Francisco. These people were named Martins. Mrs. Martin wanted a good cook. So my sister told her, "I've got a sister that's a good cook, but I don't know about cooking for this many people and serving them."

She said, "I'm willing to serve. She cooks and I'll get the food served." These were her roomers, people that lived there.

They ate this one big meal at night, evening. I was off at seven o'clock because the help would clean up. I would go in at one o'clock. I worked that job about a year and a half. She sold her guest house to some people from Oroville and I worked for them about a month. They found out they got a shady deal from them.

He was the little shady fellow. He was a little Filipino. She was an Englishman. He was just as tricky as he could be. Anyway, these people, they tricked them. They had furnished that house. They were supposed to have been selling them everything, the whole building and everything. They got good money out of them. All of the supplies in the kitchen were brought in huge supplies, like hundreds of pounds of flour and sugar.

Those people called in a truck, a van, and they moved everything out of that house. Bedrooms, they moved everything out of the house overnight. They might have had two vans, I don't know, because that was a big house. Sixty-five people stayed in that house.

When I came to work the next day she met me and she told me, "Selena, we are leaving. The Martins gave us a shady deal. But we want you to have everything in that kitchen that you want, all that food and the groceries. Anything in there that you want, if you can find a way to get it away from here we want you to have it."

I called home and my sister-in-law had a station wagon, a huge Ford station wagon. I called them to come over and bring that station wagon. We piled groceries so high we almost broke the springs on my car. We got everything, five pounds of coffee and a hundred pounds of sugar, and flour, and shortening, and tea, and all kinds of spices, and syrups, and just everything that you could mention that you would serve to guests like that but meat. They didn't have meat there because they brought in their meat daily.

When the Martins came to collect the monthly rent, they found an empty house and those people were gone. They were outdone. Did you know three months later they wanted me to come back to work for them and they had opened up another place downtown? So I went to work for him. I worked for him about six or seven months and she got sick. I liked her very much, but I just couldn't

stand him because he would go out and bring in bad food, chickens that didn't smell good.

Dunning: Then you would have to cook it?

Foster: --and vegetables that weren't fresh. So he and I had a real run in about some frying chicken. I told him, "I'm not serving that chicken to anybody. I'm not going to. If the health department comes out here they're going to get me just like they would you because if somebody gets sick on this stuff they're going to know I had to know it when I cooked it. And I'm not doing it."

Well, "Hey, those chickens are all right. I took them and rinsed them off in a little vinegar." That's supposed to kill something. "I know those chickens are all right. They're all right."

He had taken a piece of the chicken and he fried it and he had put so much baking soda and vinegar in this water that he washed them, when he dropped this chicken in the hot grease, I'm not kidding with you, it foamed up and came over and almost set the stove on fire.

By this time I was headed for my uniform, to get out of my uniform. I told him, "I won't work for you any longer. I want my paycheck."

"I think you're just tired. I think you're just tired. You need to take a rest. You need to take a rest. You need a little vacation. You've been working too steady."

I said, "No, I haven't been working too steady. How could you think I would go and take a rest. I haven't made that much money working here that I could vacation this soon. So look, because I'm telling you that I'm not going to feed those people garbage. Now you think I need a rest. You can give me a permanent rest. You just give me my paycheck."

So he asked me would I give him until Thursday. I think this was on Monday I had come in and he had this garbage sitting up waiting to be cooked.

So I said, "Yes, and I won't give you any longer than until Friday either, because I won't be back."

So he went out and he got me something else to cook that evening. I think he went and got me a fresh pork shoulder and I really had to work hard to get it ready on time because I started my meal at one o'clock every day and he was in the kitchen working with this stuff when I got there. He would go to these markets where they would have produce. He would get crates of lettuce and stuff like that that had been left over from Saturday until Monday.

A lot of times I would go in there and I would find lettuce that I didn't think was fit and I would dump it right in the garbage disposal.

Sometimes the salad would come up short and he would want to know what happened. The kids would say to him,

"Well, some of that lettuce you had in there wasn't good. It was bad and we just couldn't use it." So he was a little stinker.

When I came in after my paycheck Friday, he says to me--everybody was honey. "Honey, I don't have the checks ready. I haven't got your money yet." The boarders hadn't paid him and he couldn't pay the employees.

I said, "You know, when I told you Monday I wouldn't be here any longer than Friday you said nothing to me about you couldn't pay me if they didn't pay you. That wasn't in the contract when you hired me. I want my money and I'm not coming back over here after it."

So I called up to the house and I told his wife about it. She sent me my money and she sent me the cutest little note, and she was sorry that we had had that run-in and so forth but it had been a pleasure having me work for her. I got that note. I saved it. Somewhere in some of my stowaway right now. And I left from there and never saw them again.

Recollections of Husband's Shipyard Days

Dunning: Before we jump ahead to the fifties and sixties, I want to ask you a little more about the shipyard days. Do you recall any stories that your husband told you about working in the shipyard?

Foster: My husband enjoyed his days in the shipyard, and he especially enjoyed his little group that he got together with. He didn't work with a big group that had something going all the time and with guys that were pushy, you know. Because there was some of those bosses in the shipyard, they were pushy and rough. He had this young woman who was over him in his group. She was the leader in their group.

He's had a wonderful group that he worked with and never missed a day from work those nineteen months that he was in there. Some of those people he made good enough friends with that they visited with us after the shipyard days were over with. One of those men, he settled here and he and his wife started a little ranch and they had chickens and rabbits. He used to bring us those tame rabbits. My husband ate them. I couldn't stand it.

Dunning: Now, are those people still around?

Foster: I don't know. They were from Arkansas. The man was named Ben and his wife's name was Annie. They used to be in the service station business back there. She was telling me about the first paycheck that he brought home. Oh yes, she and I shared that joke together about what we were making and how much our bring-home pay was when we left coming here.

So Ben had come here and had got established and sent back for her and she came. So the first day that Ben got a paycheck and he came home, he laid it in her

lap and she took it and she looked at it and she said, "Where did you get all this money?" I don't know if he had cashed the check or he gave her the check. But she said, "Where did you get all this money? Did you borrow money or something?"

He said, "No, that's my paycheck."

She said she looked at it and she said, "Why, we didn't make this money in the gas station in a month." I'll never forget it. Her name was Annie.

He said, "Oh Annie, yes. Yes we did."

But she said, "How much do you make an hour?"

I think he told her he made \$1.95 or something like that, or it might have been \$2.05 or something in the shipyard. She couldn't believe that. She had to write back home and tell her people that Ben's one paycheck was more than they made in a month back there.

Well, my husband's was the same thing. Before we came here I was working in this day work and I imagine maybe I made about \$14 a week.

Dunning: Fourteen dollars a week back in Texas?

Foster: Yes. That was about \$14 a week. Even the days that I worked that wasn't hardly four dollars or three dollars.

Dunning: You worked five or six days a week?

Foster: Five days. I had two families I worked for two days a week and one I worked for one day a week. And that was about the size of my pay. Before I left Tyler to come to that job I cooked in this public school for a thousand kids and teachers. We got paid every two weeks and I made \$6.50 a week, so that was \$13 every two weeks. That was the kind of money.

My husband worked in this service station and he must have made around \$12 or \$14 a week. And he worked seven days a week most of the time. Fifteen dollars was the top in there.

At that time we had an automobile, we had a two-bedroom apartment, and we had good clothes, both of us. We had a little nest egg. We came to California. I'll never forget this one lady came to my mother-in-laws house. My mother used to work for her.

Her name is Mrs. Anderson and she said to me, "Mollie told me you and Marvin have been fixing to drift off out in California. You shouldn't go out there. You're going to go out there and get broke. They tell me people are starving out there. Mollie and Richard will be having to be sending after you."

I said, "No, Mrs. Anderson, they won't send after me. Because I'm carrying my fare with me. I have enough money to get back home on."

But I go out to California and things weren't like I found it. So three years later, I went back to visit and we had a brand new car. Mama wanted my husband to carry her out on the job so that she could see our new car. Oh, she had a fit. She wanted to come to California herself. Also, the job that my husband had quit, Mr. MacMillan's wife, she said the same thing. She wanted to come to California after she found out that we had come out here and did so well.

So I said to Mrs. Marsha, "You just come and take a visit out there. Then you wouldn't want any more service station here."

Marsha said, "I'm coming to visit my brother. I can't get Polk to close off the service station." So she came to San Diego to visit her brother and got her a job down there at the navy base. She made good money and she stayed out here for four or six months, and she went back.

She said, "Well, Marvin and Selena saved their money. They done well in California. So I'm going to go back and I'm going to do the same thing."

Expectations of California

Dunning: During our first two sessions we covered your family background and your moving to Richmond from the South, and working in the defense diner, and a number of your

other jobs. Today I would like to talk about the post-war years. Before that I would like to ask you, did California meet your expectations?

Foster: Yes. In some aspects I would say it did.

Dunning: In what aspects?

Foster: Well, the general area, and especially Richmond, is the kind of climate that I would love to have lived in. That you can see. Right away I never tried to explore any of the other parts. We took up right here. When we first came to California I was a little disappointed at the rain. It rained an awful lot every day. Of course, it rained back in Texas and it stormed and rained, but we had a season for it.

It was a kind of continuous thing here during the war. It rained day and night. You could have the most beautiful sunshine morning and think "Oh, this is a perfect day for washing," get the wash ready and put it on the line, and before you could get back in the house it was raining. To see the people walking and wading in the streets in the water with bare feet, to me that was really something in the time of year that I came, which was February. Because back in Texas if you had gotten a rain like that in February you would have pneumonia and die. [laughs]

Dunning: Did you or your husband ever consider moving back to the South?

Foster: No, not really.

Dunning: Even after the shipyard closed?

Foster: My husband said to me, "We have no home to go back to." We had a little money and we found property was fairly reasonable if you could find something to buy. We owned a couple of trailer homes and found living in the trailer courts at one place was very pleasant, up at El Cerrito where Capwell's is right now. We didn't intend to continue to live there but we could have for a duration, a period.

Dunning: How long did you live there?

Foster: Somewhere around nineteen months in trailer homes. We started out on Wright Avenue here in Richmond. We bought a small trailer at first and then after about the nineteenth or twentieth of December in '44 we moved out of there and moved over to El Cerrito right where El Cerrito Plaza is right now. We stayed there until '46, I believe, in October or November. We had taken rooms in a private home while we were all the time looking for something to buy.

Purchase of Home in Richmond, 1947

Foster: We made a trip back in '45 to Texas but with no intentions of staying. We went back and sold some of the things that we had and gave the rest of it away that we had stored and came on back. After we came back and

bought a home in May, I believe it was, May the seventeenth we moved into our first little home here.

Dunning: Where was that?

Foster: Right on Hoffman and Twenty-ninth Street here. The first little house just back. There was a service station there and they tore it down, but it's right across from Safeway warehouse. Do you know where the Cortez School is?

Dunning: Yes.

Foster: It's right across from the Cortez School. In fact, these children I have right now, their mother went to that school when it was brand new. I was one of the first P.T.A. workers working with the little children in that school.

Dunning: Did you buy the land and the house?

Foster: We bought the house, yes.

Dunning: I know prices have changed incredibly. Do you remember what you paid?

Foster: Yes. Six thousand dollars. That sounds like a lot of money in a way, but \$6,000 even we paid for it. We sold it twenty-three years ago for \$11,000 and something. We had done some improvement on it. But that's just how much property had really gone up anyway.

Postwar Housing in Richmond

Dunning: I'm curious about what Richmond was like immediately after the war. Did you feel a change right away when the shipyards closed?

Foster: Not really. It took about six months or a little longer, or maybe a year, before I really felt the great change like seeing the people move away. A lot of people that we knew went back south and various places. Then they began to migrate back.

Dunning: That's what I've heard because I've always asked people were they tempted to leave, did they go back? And a lot of people went back home but then they returned to California again.

Foster: Came right back. And a lot of them came back to find that the houses were being demolished and taken out, too.

Dunning: In Richmond? The war housing?

Foster: Right, being closed down. What they did, like they would move different areas, I think. The first one I remember they moved was--it was the one way around behind the Canal around Yard Three. They moved those people into the Canal housing. Then later they moved some of the Canal people into Seaport and Jefferson Avenue, back down that way. And then right in here there were houses. There were at least six, I believe, of those buildings, or eight, on this street and the street behind me.

Dunning: Around Cutting and Twenty-seventh?

Foster: Right, those were the war housing. And I'm not too sure there wasn't some on Twenty-sixth, too. Anyway, in this general area there was housing and they kept bringing the people, around Spring and Carlson, back down there. They moved those people over across Cutting into this area here.

They just tore the houses out in sections. I guess some of the first ones they demolished was the ones way around--I don't know if they tore them down either--by Shipyard Three. That is where the first Contra Costa College was, right there, it seemed like to me.

The private homes, most of these homes in here across Cutting, Foothill and around, were there. But there were very few black people in there. I know of three families, or four, that were there, and I had a friend who lived on Cutting in a little house right on the corner of Twenty-sixth here. But the house that we bought over there, I don't think there were any other black people in that area. They were Italian people, mostly. I got to meet quite a few of them. Shortly after we moved there they began to sell and move away.

One lady, Mrs. Carrelli I remember, she said to me one day, "You know, I had been wanting to see who moved over in this house." She knew who owned the house originally, but then there had been a family, a young couple from Arkansas had bought this house. The husband

was in service. When he came out of service, of course, they had a young baby and they didn't stay. They went back. So Mrs. Carrelli was anxious to know who bought the house.

She was out walking one day, she and her daughter, and she came down past the house. And I talked to her for quite a long time. So after getting ready to leave, she said, "I wanted to tell you that I've lived here on this place for sixty years at least. And those real estate people are coming around bugging us trying to get us to pack up and sell out because the black people are moving in, as if you were coming in to eat us up." That's what she said to me.

She invited me to come over. She raised a beautiful garden and got vegetables at her place. She was over on Thirtieth Street behind me. The other family, the Richardsons, lived right in the front of where Mrs. Moore, one of my church members, lives now. They were very good friends. Mrs. Carrelli stood there and pointed out to me all the rent houses that were in here and who the families were that had owned them and how many years. She used to tell me about the pastures being in here, cattle and so forth.

Dunning: Yes, it was very rural.

Foster: Yes, and Cutting Boulevard was one of the thoroughfares. But there were just little roads down through here and lakes of water. I guess the Japanese people that put in the gardens and those hothouses, because there were

hothouses all down through where I first came to Ernest Street. That's where my brother was staying.

Dunning: Before you moved into that neighborhood, did you have any fears about moving into an all white neighborhood?

Foster: Not at all. It was pretty well spaced and everything. My neighbors were white. The Reeses, Reverend Reese and his wife were very friendly. His first wife had died and he had just married this new lady from up around Winters. They had this little grocery store and a laundry between my house and their house. He built another house in there, an apartment. He was very, very friendly. We were very good neighbors. With the school coming there it wasn't quite so integrated, but it was mixed.

Dunning: How long did the transformation from the neighborhood being white to being black take? Was that gradual or did it happen pretty fast?

Foster: It was gradual, because I was just trying to think. The Richardsons, I think, have just died out, or are the last ones left from there since I came off of that street. I've been up here twenty-three years, so I stayed down there seventeen years and they were still there and still were good neighbors.

Right up the street from us we had one family that came in that wasn't so friendly. I didn't care for them and I think the man was doing shady things and that's why he didn't particularly care for the blacks or anybody else in that area. He was a policeman in the San Pablo

area and he was finally caught with these penny ante machines, slot machines and so forth, in that old big house there right across from the school.

Foster: The next family up from that house, the man, I can't recall his name now, he used to work on the ferry. They were Italian people. They had a big walnut tree in the yard. They had a couple of daughters, I think, but they grew up and left before I moved away from down there.

The Easter Hill Methodist Church bought two of those buildings near Hoffman, but I can't remember the families that were there. We purchased a property from Cal and Jim Critchfield, who were real estate people at that time. So they had been closed out. But there was an old well there and I remember the people that lived there. They had the tallest corn. They used to raise big huge gardens back in that field.

Dunning: So you really still could get an idea of a farming area even in the forties.

Foster: Yes. Many of those places on Thirtieth Street there. You could go down through there and you could see corn taller than I am, much taller than I am, and all kinds of vegetation because there were spaces. There are some houses that have been built. Well, there's new houses in there now, in fact.

Dunning: When did Richmond get the city feeling?

Foster: I guess after they built the city hall I began to look at Richmond as being a little bit more of a city.

Dunning: In the fifties?

Foster: Yes. I never did associate with Point Richmond much. I was only in Point Richmond one time as I can remember, to see an attorney, when the Richmond jail was still down in that part, and the city hall I guess. That's the first time that I had ever gone into the old Richmond.

Dunning: Did you not go in because you felt uncomfortable going in there, or--?

Foster: No. I never had an occasion to. I mean, there was no association for me. We mostly went to restaurants on Macdonald Avenue. When I went out, if we went out for nightclubs or any kind of shows, we went to Berkeley or to Oakland. Mainly we went on the San Francisco side on weekends because I did have some friends over there. And we loved to go to the beach. When friends came to visit with us, we always took the ferry. We liked to ride the ferry.

Dunning: You would take the ferry to San Francisco?

Foster: We would take the ferry over to Marin County and then go.

Dunning: The Richmond-San Rafael ferry?

Foster: Yes, and go that way. I don't know, I didn't have any reason for going into Point Richmond, I suppose. As far down as I had been was the canal and around by the Santa Fe station and back this way. I didn't like North Richmond. I guess I was in North Richmond, if I can say for a visit, an average of ten times.

Dunning: Ever?

Foster: Well, no, that was during the war time. I visited churches out there, mainly the Church of God and Christ, McGlothen Temple. We made friends with the McGlothen's and there were family relatives who belonged to the Church of God and Christ. So I used to frequently go to church with them and I was instrumental in helping her to get housing through Ella McGlothen. I began to get a little bit more friendly with families in North Richmond and meet more families there.

Parchester Village, 1950s

Foster: I guess in the early fifties when they started building Parchester Village I began to venture out that way a little bit more. Now a lot of the people that I knew who had left Richmond and went either to Oakland or they left and went back to their homes and eventually came back to Oakland because they could find housing there, as soon as they found out they were building here they wanted to come back to Richmond.

Dunning: To Parchester?

Foster: Yes. So the ministers in Richmond, minister's alliance they called it, got together, and I guess just about twenty-five or thirty ministers have namesakes out there, streets named after them. We used to go Sunday after Sunday and look at it. I used to say to my husband, "That doesn't appeal to me at all. I don't think I would like to move. I don't like Parchester no more than I like North Richmond. I just don't think I would like to live out here."

At the time they were saying that it was going to be integrated. Over on the east side of Giant Road there already there were lots of little cottages and little houses we had been shown. Mostly all of that area was white. We had been in there and looked at houses before we bought our house and I didn't like that area. So having not liked it there I was pretty sure I would not like Parchester Village.

Dunning: It seemed like Parchester Village was pretty controversial right from the beginning.

Foster: It was. That's what I'm fixing to say, but they had a little bit of a bait they were using. They would build these model homes, and there would always be a white family that had the model home, or they would say that they were buying, and they were out there looking. But just as soon as the houses were complete or one block was complete, it would become all black.

Block by block we noticed this was happening. So my in-laws, the ones that I told you that came and I helped them get settled in North Richmond. They were looking for a place to buy. We discovered this was so obvious that this was all becoming a black settlement that we discouraged them from buying out there.

In fact, at first, when we started going they thought we would buy and they would too. We said, "No," we weren't moving. We were going to stay where we were. If we moved at all we would be moving toward Berkeley."

So they began then looking toward Berkeley and Oakland. They finally found a home in East Oakland. It's way out close to Hegenberger Road. Now those were nice places and they were integrated. But again the transition was made pretty fast. It became practically all black. That was about '52 or '53 that this had happened.

By that time we had become very well settled in our place which we had bought there in '47, and knew that we were going to stay there. So then we began to improve a little bit, and as the housing tore down, they began to tear down where Cortez school is now. All of that was houses on both sides there, back to back there were those apartments, something like five or six, five buildings I believe to be exact, on each side. The lumber and everything that came out of those houses were being purchased by people that we knew who were settling in North Richmond and around who built their own houses.

One family that lived on Spring Street just right around from me had bought an old house. It was one of the old ranch Italian built homes, and the Shields were going to build their own house so they bought one of those whole big buildings with someone else, got the lumber out of it, and they built this nice house right on the corner of Twenty-sixth here and Virginia.

Over the period of years that they were building on that house, which was a couple or three years, Brother Shields died. He didn't even get to move into his new home. But the family, they were a pretty well compact family. He had a sister-in-law, and his wife, and a brother-in-law, who all lived in the same house together. So the one sister-in-law got married to a Mr. Simon, and Mr. Simon finished that house, he and Roosevelt, who was the brother. And the family moved over to that new home.

They stayed there in that house together until Roosevelt died. That left the sister, who was a widow, and the sister that had got married, and her husband still there, and some grandkids. Then later Mrs. Shields, she died, and then Mr. Simon, and left the sister-in-law who had gotten married, left her a widow there with her brother Roosevelt and those grandkids. Then later Roosevelt died, so now she's there with those grandkids and great grandkids now in that house.

Dunning: Quite a history to that house.

Foster: Yes, it sure is. And they keep it up very nice. That's the one thing I can say. It's too bad he didn't get to

live and enjoy that house because he had so many plans for that big family. He started out to build a big house so they could keep them together. Then he didn't get to make it.

Problems in North Richmond

Dunning: I was curious, after the war and in the fifties, was there any area in Richmond that was considered the bad part of town, or any area that you didn't feel comfortable going into?

Foster: North Richmond, I guess, would be the place that everyone had always said. I don't know whether it was so much bad because there wasn't this murdering and thievery going on like it is today. The slum part is the part that I feared, because where I came from we came from a very clean little town. We didn't have a slum area unless it would be one like I would say down by the railroad tracks or where the trains came in, where the hobo village was. Every town gets those occasionally.

But that would be the only slum area that I could say that I knew anything about around our home. Again, I say I've only seen it half a dozen times in my years because we just didn't go there. But in North Richmond there were shanties but now that I look back on it, it was people like us who came and had nothing and were trying to find a way of life or a place for themselves. They bought trailer houses and they built little shanties.

with whatever lumber and stuff--you know, you couldn't even get lumber in those days--that they could find.

And they built little two-room and three-room shanties for their families, and their families were big and some kept growing so a lot of those people that were considered very, very poor that migrated into here now, I've seen them come into quite a wealthy looking home, prosperous. I won't say they have that much wealth, but they're prosperous anyway.

For instance, the in-law family of mine that I was telling you about, they came here with seven kids. They came in an old beat-up Plymouth car pulling a homemade trailer that they said cost them so much gasoline between here and Texas. But what they did was they migrated into the harvest in west Texas or northwest Texas and were quite successful in making money that fall. The harvest were very good and the wages were much better then they had ever been before.

Like us, they just didn't have anything to go back to. Their little possessions they had stored and left back there, so they came this way. They got here in 1947 to Fresno, I believe it was just before Thanksgiving. The weather had gotten too bad in the harvest where they came from and they wanted to make it through. They came Route 66 and they wanted to get through there. We had told them how cold it got before then. So they migrated to Fresno and they made it there and were able to work in the harvest down in Fresno a little bit and make quite a little bit of money.

Dunning: So they worked en route to Richmond?

Marvin Foster's Employment

Foster: Yes, but we went and got them. My husband, Marvin, found a job for his step-brother. We went and got them and brought him here first. He stayed with us a couple or so weeks and got a pretty good job. In fact, he got his job that he stayed on for years.

Dunning: Where was that job?

Foster: That job was on Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco.

Dunning: What was it?

Foster: Lubrication and automobile. Then later he went to work for a fellow by the name of Saul--I can't think of Saul's last name now, but it was a Jewish fellow that ran a storage garage where people park and store their cars. He worked there for, I would say, about seven or eight years. Then my husband got him another job with him. They went to Walnut Creek for the Cadillac and Oldsmobile people. That's where he retired from. Also, that's where my husband retired from.

Now my husband went exploring on the nineteenth of August, I believe, after we had taken our vacation. After the duration of the war we had taken our first trip back to Texas and brought back a few things with us as

I said, and sold some. So he went out looking for him a job before the shipyard completely closed down and just walked right into this job, the Cadillac and Oldsmobile place. He just stopped by there and saw the sign 'Help Wanted.' He walked in and talked with one of the young men there. It was a white boy. I think his name was Jim. He was lubricating cars.

So he said, "I see you got a sign up, help wanted here. What kind of help are they looking for?"

He said, "A lubrication man." "Grease monkey," he called it.

My husband said, "Well, you got one here. That's my job."

He said, "Really? You know anything about lube?"

He said, "Yes sir. That's what I was doing before I went into the wartime work."

So he said, "Where are you from?" My husband told him and everything and he said, "Is that right? Do you want to go up and talk to the boss, because I need some help." They had three lube racks and two wash racks and only had the one lube man working, two guys washing cars.

My husband said to him, "Yes, I used to work on wash rack and the lube."

He said, "Well, we need a lube man."

So he went up and talked to the man and got hired the same day and went to work. They gave him a pair of white coveralls and he went to work right there that day. He was so late coming home I got kind of worried that he had ventured off over to San Francisco looking for a job because we just had never been around San Francisco looking for any work. We visited over there like I said, and went to the beach and around, but it was five o'clock in the evening and my husband wasn't home and he had been gone all day. So I just was kind of curious about it.

I went next door and I talked with the Evans family that lived by me. They said to me, "Oh well, transportation is heavy this time of the evening. It's hard for buses you know, be crowded. Maybe he just missed the bus or something."

I guess about ten or fifteen minutes to seven he came and he had on these greasy coveralls. I said to him, "What are you doing in all them greasy, dirty clothes?"

He said, "I've been lubing cars."

I thought it must be close to home for him to be so dirty. I didn't think he would come on the bus like that. But he said, "Well, there wasn't any place to wash up."

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Dunning: So he was very successful his first day?

Foster: Yes. He said, "There's no place to wash up there and I just decided I would come on home just like this today. But from now on I can take my work clothes with me. And I like it."

I asked him what he was doing and he told me. He said, "I'm working for the cadillac people, at one thousand Van Ness Avenue." I'll never forget that. So he said, "I think what I'm going to have you do is to drop me off to work carry my tools and everything." Because he had his own tool kit and everything. He said, "I'll have to buy a few things because everybody had to furnish their own. So I'm just going to have you drop me off to work and you'll see where I'm working at."

Purchase of Automobiles, Late 1940s

Dunning: You had a car?

Foster: Oh yes, we had a car. Well, we brought a car to California with us. We came in a 1935 standard little Chevy coup. We drove it through 1945, until '46 I guess it was.

In May of '46 we bought almost a brand new '42 Chevy. This young man had gotten killed in the service and his father and mother had this car jacked up and had the tires wrapped and the car had never been down on the ground since he had gone into the services. He went in

in '42 or '43. So they lived up in El Cerrito and we were there in that trailer court.

My husband was riding with this man. Coming from San Francisco is how he struck up the conversation that he was going to buy a car, and he said, "Do you know, I've deposited money twice." We did. On a Ford and a Chevy. And each time people with more money could undercut you. They could get the car.

Dunning: Would you get your deposit back?

Foster: Oh yes, you got your money back. But they would always put you higher on the list, or drop you back, I'll say. So my husband just got kind of tired of the runaround and he said, "Well, I'm not going to trade with those guys. I'm going to take my money back and I'm not going to fool with them."

So this man kept telling my husband about this car. He spoke a very broken Italian language. My husband had said to me, "This guy keeps telling me he lives on 'Wicker' Street or something." It was Eureka, right back up here. He said, "We get off together right down here by the bank. I'm going to find it Saturday. Let's go over there and look at the car." Because he didn't drive, this old man didn't. He said, "The only thing, we would probably have to have tires. They would probably be rotten."

We goes over there and that old man had those tires wrapped and tied with newspapers and that car was covered

up just as clean as it could be. It didn't have a blemish on it. I've got pictures of it now I could show you.

He said, "If you think you want it I'll get the tires and put them on it." He was going to buy the tires for us. And tires had been hard to get. But he wanted to sell it just that bad.

So my husband said, "Yes, I think I want it. I want to see what my wife thinks about it. We'll talk it over and we'll come back." As I remember now, I think he wanted \$1200 or \$1400 for it. That's all we paid for it.

My husband said, "Gee, it looks just like the '46." They had just started making new cars. He went down and he looked at a '46 and he compared it, and he said, "Gee, for what they're asking, something like \$3,000 or \$3,500, I'm going to buy that car."

So we went back down there to see the old man and talk to him about the tires. He said, "Yes, I'll buy some new tires for you." And he did. He bought us some new tires and we paid him cash for the car.

Mother-in-Law, Mollie Bowie, Moves to California, 1947

Foster: So we taken us another vacation in May of '47. Not really a vacation, but we went on and made it a vacation anyway. Mama's husband died, his mother. We had just

bought this house and had moved into it. We hadn't moved into it. The trailer was still over there in El Cerrito.

But we had bought this house and so we went for the funeral, taking our vacation, and sold part of her stuff. She wanted to come back to California and live with us. My mother persuaded my husband to say he would bring her. So we left her. She came a month behind us. She shipped us a few things, like I had a real nice Sealy mattress, I remember. I shipped that mattress and a little Frigidaire. I had a brand new Frigidaire when I left for the war. I left it with his mother. So we shipped those two things and a big trunk for her. That's all we brought in the line of furnishing.

But when we got back to Fresno coming home, we called to my job and someone on the job told me that the people we bought the house from had been looking for us. They didn't want the house to stand vacant because they didn't cut the lights and gas off. They wanted us to come on in due to the insurance evaluation.

So we had to take right off. We were going to stop over with my sister in Fresno for another couple of days. We rushed on home, got here, and we slept on the floor that night in that house. I never will forget it.

Dunning: You've had a lot of changes immediately.

Foster: Yes, I did. And the good thing that happened to me, we moved in that same night, which was I believe was Saturday night. We couldn't get our furnishing. I had

already purchased furniture from Union Furniture Company here in Richmond. But we couldn't get it delivered until Monday or Tuesday. A stove and everything; we were just down there in the house and that was all.

I remember that was the coldest May. It was so cold. I had to go over on San Pablo and buy me a set of those gas logs. Because they didn't have any heater in that house. The old floor furnace they had, it was out, and these people had been heating by their cookstove and a little heater that they had set in the fireplace. So in the fireplace there was a gas connection. I went and got me this huge big gas log. It made the prettiest flames and had good heat, too.

We got our furnishing in on Monday and Tuesday of the next week. And I got a call that my trailer house had sold. We got \$2500 for it. We had lived in it about fourteen or fifteen months. Because the first trailer we had, we lived in it four or five months and then bought that new one.

I said, "Gee, this is really coming in handy now." I had paid for practically all the furniture I had bought, but it was a lot of odds and ends. I didn't have table lamps and things that I wanted, and pictures for the wall. So I went down and got my money for that trailer. I paid cash for everything that I got. I didn't put any rugs on the floor. We had beautiful hardwood floors so I didn't want to cover them. I just used scatter rugs.

But this one bedroom, I didn't get anything for it because his mother wanted to buy her own furnishing when she got here. So we left that room vacant. I got my venetian blinds and everything that I wanted to put up in the house before she got here. She got here one month to the day that she buried her husband. Of course, then I let her go down and get her furnishing and furnish her part of the house, and I went back to work.

The job didn't last long. Leo sold out to these fellows that had been working for him and they put in a bar down there. They had to have food, so the little restaurant part, they kept that open and I worked for them. I guess I worked for them two and a half or three months. And I was being let out of work. So I put in for unemployment. I had never drawn any before.

There was one woman down at this unemployment office, I could have just shook her. Every time I would go in there she would just ask me the deepest questions about where I had looked for worked, was I sure I had been looking for gainful employment.

I asked her one day, "Are you an attorney, or what are you? It's my understanding that if I wasn't here applying for unemployment, you wouldn't have a job." She turned red as a beet. I really fixed her up.

I said, "You wouldn't even have a job if I wasn't here. I'm not asking you to give me anything. That's my own money, and I understand it's my own money. I worked in the shipyard around here around nineteen or

twenty months and paid into that unemployment insurance, and I never drew a dime of it. Now they told me to come and apply for it. The union told me that I was entitled to it. I'm here to apply for it."

I drew that unemployment insurance for two and a half months. In the last of August or September my mother-in-law and I got to talking one day and she said, "You know, we should open up us a little restaurant. Not in Richmond necessarily. Why don't you find some other place to open it up where things might be better?"

Opening a Restaurant in Oakland

Foster: A guy had a place in Harbor Gate over here. He told me about this woman who was opening up a little place, building it rather, and she was going to rent it out, on the corner of Market and Meade and Twenty-fourth Street in Oakland. It was just a cat-a-corner there. I knew her sister.

So we goes over and looks at this little place, and she was making it real neat. It had about eight bar stools in it and three tables that seated four people each. So altogether about twenty seating capacity. The overhead wasn't very much. It had a nice soda fountain and counter built in and just a grill, short order place with a small stove in it. Just what we needed. We didn't need a lot of work to do just the two of us. So we took it.

We started out with our home-baked pies and we would make barbeque and we would cook all the southern dishes and greens. There was a lot of people in that area that liked that kind of food, so our trade mainly came from Borden Milk Company, Carnation Milk Company, two or three cleaning establishments there, and a great big laundry right down the street from us. Then there were about three or four churches right around us there, and a school. The school kids would come. I couldn't keep enough pie a la mode. I would bake pies until late in the night at home when I would get off in the evening when I closed, and then I would leave the place open. I had hired a girl to work with me and sometimes she would close up for me.

I was doing just fine. My husband persuaded me to put in beer. I didn't want it. That kind of cut down on the school kids.

Dunning: They weren't allowed in?

Foster: They could come but they couldn't hang around. They would come in and sometimes play the music box and get them some ice cream or milkshake or something and go on. But I kept the place five to six months. Just when it was really beginning to pay off, I was getting a good salary out of it for my mother and I both and putting the rest back into the business, building it up, he became discontented with it. He didn't want me to have it.

Dunning: Your husband?

Foster: Yes. He wanted me home. He was working in San Francisco and he would get off the bus and come home, you know, nobody there in the evening, and he had been used to coming in and eating his meals. Well, I could persuade him to come through Oakland and eat breakfast. He would go with me and eat his breakfast and catch the the bus on to San Francsico, but he didn't want to come back in the evening. So he worked with me a couple of weekends and he just didn't like it and he decided, well, we had better get rid of it. So I sold it.

Dunning: Was that difficult for you?

Foster: To sell it?

Dunning: I mean just emotionally, to give it up?

Foster: It happened so quickly it hurt me because I put so much in it to try to get it going. It was kind of a let down, too, because I didn't get out of it what I should have, having put as much in. But what I did was I traded some of it with this guy that had had the place in Harbor Gate. A lot of the utensils and stuff like that that I had bought I traded it with him after selling in the business, and he later gave me money out of a lot of that stuff I got something out of. I took a job right across the street from there working in a soda fountain in a little hamburger joint.

Dunning: In Harbor Gate?

Foster: No, in Oakland, right across the street from where my place was.

Dunning: Were your hours shorter?

Foster: Yes. My hours were shorter. I worked for a family called Lamars. I would go in at three and work until nine for them. They just had short orders and hamburgers and milkshakes, and a soda fountain. They were kind of aged people and both of them were a little bit diabetic. They lived in the back of the place so I would close up for them at night or I would work until nine and he would come out and help me close up because they were right there in the building. And my husband would be there to pick me up when I didn't drive myself.

I worked there for them until '49, I believe. I had taken a vacation. When I came back off of my vacation I went to work for Capwell, Sullivan, and Furth down in Oakland. I worked there a little over two years. Then I went back to San Francisco and worked in what they call a guest house.

Dunning: Yes, in fact you told me about that.

Foster: Then Leo discovered that I was back at work and he came and got me right out from under those guys. I went back to work for him. That was in '52. So I worked back for he and Mary '52 and '53. They sold that place out and she came back to Richmond and opened up the Cow Wow. Did you ever know where the Cow Wow was?

Dunning: No.

Foster: Right in the back of Macy's. Downtown. It was Macy's then. Well, the old Macy building, I guess, is still there. That's where the social security place is now. Well, the Cow Wow was on the back of that place. It was a new building, too, and I think they've torn that down.

Dunning: I think so. I know you mentioned that you have to pick up your niece at a certain time so we're a little limited today in terms of time. But there were a few questions that I like to ask everybody. One is, since you arrived in the war, what do you think have been the best times in Richmond or the best times for Richmond?

Foster: It's kind of hard to say, really.

Dunning: I'm also going to ask you the reverse of that, the worst times in Richmond.

Foster: I guess some of the best times were in the '50s. The best prosperity for me and my husband was about from '54 or '55 up until '70. I mean, it seemed like to me there was never a decline in our personal income. I know we started buying new cars and we were both gainfully employed and were able to do a lot of other things, take vacations and so forth, which we had never had very good vacations. We had a week off or ten days, but we got to the place where we could just take our vacations and just go where we wanted to and when. So from 1955 until '79 when my husband died, things were very good with us.

I don't know about unemployment around here, how that went down, but I should think along about the time that Richmond started making its transition from the Macdonald Avenue shopping area to Hilltop Mall. There were a slump in there for people for work.

Decline of Downtown Richmond, 1950s

Dunning: It seems a number of people I've talked to, that even more than the shipyards closing, the destruction of downtown is what really got to--

Foster: Right. I think the biggest frustration I've felt, becoming unhappy about the situation. Because I also became kind of sociably involved and civically minded. I began to notice. I would visit the city council, and roundabout I started to doing a little bit more of that after I became gainfully employed in the city because I worked for a factory that the union was strong. We watched a lot of things that were going on in Richmond and how the employment situation was with different factors and things that were coming in here and who was being employed and who wasn't.

I went to work in '55 at the Eastman Factory. That's when I really began to notice a lot of the frustration of the area from where they were tearing up and misplacing or displacing employment and moving the stores and things around. There just wasn't anything much in Richmond to do.

The theaters closed up. That was really kind of a sad note. Here at one time we had had three or four theaters in Richmond. There were other places of recreation, and most all of that just closed up until they started building some recreation centers and reopening back up again there was no place for kids to go. There was just not much of anything to do.

Dunning: There really wasn't a center. Even today there really isn't a center.

Foster: Not really, that's right. But at least they do have some places where you can go. I guess that between the time that they were building the Richmond-San Rafael bridge and--

Dunning: Which was in mid-'56?

Foster: Right, somewhere along in there. I began to notice the traffic a little bit more through here. Because I lived right on Highway 17 there, and that was to me just another boulevard. It wasn't really a highway. But after they built the bridge it became a highway. You began to see more people passing in and out through Richmond. It seemed to me that I noticed more people visiting Richmond. Visitors who came in from other areas would come to Richmond. Before that, I had a lot of people ask me, "Where is Richmond on the map? I've never heard of Richmond and I've never seen Richmond."

I went back to visit with a lady that my mother-in-law worked for. Mrs. Bryant said to me one day, "Did you

ever hear of this place called Vallay-jo?" Vallejo. She says, "Well, is Richmond anywhere near that place?"

Because when people said California, they thought if you wasn't in San Francisco or wasn't in Los Angeles, where were you? They just didn't know anything about the rest of these little towns. Berkeley, of course, they thought it was a small place. They just didn't talk about these other towns too much. She had heard about Vallejo in the navy base.

Dunning: Mare Island?

Foster: Yes. So I said to her, "Yes, that's not too far. It's about seventeen, eighteen miles from us. And they pronounce that Vallejo [pronounces correctly].

She said, "Well, I knew it was something like that."

And the arsenal. She had heard about the Benicia arsenal. When Port Chicago had blown up, "Selena, were you close to that thing?"

I said, "Well, we weren't too, too far away from it, but we wasn't close enough to get blasted. We got shocked."

I will never forget. I was in my trailer home when it blew up, and I felt that horrible--

Dunning: You could feel it?

Foster: Oh yes. It shook good right out here at the shipyard. Because I was up here at Wright Avenue. But it was so quick and over with so quick, and there were so many disasters happening, nobody stopped to moan or ooh about what happened. But later in the day the newspapers brought out what had really happened and we found out.

Dunning: Pretty terrifying?

Foster: Oh, it was. But I could say that for work around Richmond I found there was no work here until the middle fifties after the shipyard closed, because more people had to go to San Francisco.

Dunning: Yes, because when Kaiser left, fifty-seven other industries left, too, that were related to the war.

Foster: That's right. I guess if I was going to say that was the decline or the crucial part of it, but more and more black people, if I have to say, were continuing to come back to Richmond. They weren't finding work here, but they were coming back to Richmond more for settling here.

Dunning: But it didn't really have an economic base?

Foster: No. I would say out of the numbers of families I knew, maybe twelve or fifteen families worked out of town. They didn't have employment here in Richmond.

Richmond Today

Dunning: What do you think of Richmond's image?

Foster: I think it needs a lot of improvement. Well, Richmond isn't the worst little place there could be. I love it. I love it here. But we do have a long ways to go to get to where I think we should be in Richmond. The political arena of Richmond is just not evenly balanced as far as I'm concerned. There are a lot of people sitting around grumbling and fussing about it. There's not enough people involved in trying to make a change. That's what we need more of. They would like to see it happen but without any responsibility. So I think if enough responsible people were behind the political aspects of Richmond it could become a very nice little city.

I am still unhappy with all of the stores and everything being moved out and hope to see a comeback. I'm not really pleased to see Macdonald Avenue with homes on it. I just didn't think it should be like that. Some areas down there maybe would be all right, but I think the city itself should be improved. I think we should have shopping. One bad part that I find is that we have to go so far to shop for economical groceries and things like that. You can go to storefronts and Seven-Elevens, and Short Stop, but you paid two prices for it, and I don't think that's fair to the taxpayers. I gauge my car to see how far I'm driving to get a quart of milk sometime, or a half a gallon of milk or a gallon of milk, a dozen eggs, a loaf of bread, and a pound of bacon. I go all the way to Safeways or Lucky's. The nearest is

Food Bowl. I don't shop there an awful lot but I do go there at the end of Cutting here. That's running me a mile and half to two miles. That's four miles round trip.

Dunning: That's a lot for a loaf of bread.

Foster: That's right. But you go down here to buy one at Cash Brothers, that liquor store there, or go over to Seven-Eleven to get it, and the bread is \$1--you can get bread at Safeway for \$.79 and \$.99, and you pay \$1.35 and sometimes more. Even the little store right down here on Thirty-sixth Street. It's been there for years. I knew the people that owned that store. Woods, I believe, was the name. It's changed hands several times, but that store right now, I can't afford to buy out of that store. You go around there and get an orange or an apple and it costs you forty cents. I can't afford that. A head of lettuce at Safeway is only thirty-nine cents. It costs you sixty-nine and seventy-nine cents over there. With the kind of income that I have I can't afford to shop in places like that.

Richmond Waterfront Development

Dunning: What do you think about the new renewal or the redevelopment of the waterfront, like Marina Bay and Brickyard Landing? Do you think that's going to change Richmond?

Foster: That's fine for those who like it. I have no desire to live over there and no desire to live in the hill. To have a beautiful waterfront like San Francisco has, with the wharf and places to go, souvenirs and so forth, it's lovely to have something like that in our city. The integrated part of it down there, from what I'm hearing right now, I don't like. Some of the things that are going on, it's got to be some pressure put on that.

Dunning: You mean the fact that it's not going to be integrated?

Foster: Well, as of now, it's not being integrated from what I'm hearing.

Dunning: They have a lot of money.

Foster: That's what I'm fixing to say. I think that was one aspect for keeping minorities out, and the other is that they just don't want them there, because there are black people who have money and a lot of minority people who have money, but I understand a move has been made, the tone was set to try to keep it from happening. If I desired it I would go right after it myself. And I would find a way to get there if I had that desire, I think, but I don't like that waterfront myself. Healthwise, I don't think it would be good for me. I don't know, the scenery is beautiful for those who like it, but you can get too high on top of the hill for me, and you can sure get too close to the water. [laughs]

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Foster: I don't care for it. For those who like it--and I visit their beautiful homes and their beautiful scenery and everything--it's beautiful. I think it's beautiful, but I just wouldn't like it for me. I don't know why. I just feel a little bit more comfortable on level ground and a little bit backed off from the water. When I want to go on the water I take the ferry or I cross the bridge.

Dunning: But you could use a few stores around here?

Foster: I could use a few stores. I would like to see the small mini malls come back. I don't think we could have huge malls in Richmond. We might, but there could be some small mini malls. I noticed they built a small mini mall right on the edge of Portrero and San Pablo there. There could be some places like that built in Richmond. I see a lot of spaces.

Dunning: There are lots of spaces.

Foster: Down where the Golden Rule is, back down in there, they could use a shopping center or a nice grocery store. I notice the stores, they seem to kind of follow one another, so if they put in a Safeway, a Lucky's is going to come close by somewhere, or some of the other stores. Now, since they're getting the one-stop shopping centers, I would like to see some of those things come into our area.

The Historical Side of Richmond

Dunning: I think you're not alone. Do you see Richmond as an historical place?

Foster: Yes, I really do. The historical part of it that will go down in history is the shipyards, and it's kind of the end of the line for the railroads.

Dunning: It's the terminus for the transcontinental railroad.

Foster: Right. The historical part, some of it is. The bridge, the doing away with the ferry, the piers coming over here now, the wharf, Standard Oil. Yes, I can see a lot of history.

And there's a lot of old, old history of Richmond that a lot of people don't pay too much attention to-- some of old the buildings. I've never been to this building, but there is an old, old building, and it's part of San Pablo. I'm going to visit that place one of these days. It's kind of a monument to the era.

And I think things like this draw people, like the old Winchester home in San Jose. I can remember when San Jose wasn't much of a town. Things like that started tourists to coming. It was a drawing card for San Jose. Then pretty soon there was Marine World and other different things. Tourists began to come and visit there and a lot of people located there. People came out of the mountains from down around Santa Cruz back up on the level ground. I know a lot of people used to live in

Santa Cruz that had come back towards Oakland and San Francisco after the war.

Dunning: In a way it's too bad we didn't get a liberty ship here as a historical base since most of them were built here.

Foster: I was going to say, after having built them all here, and we didn't get one. That's right. Have they taken them all out of Port Chicago yet? They were stored up there.

Dunning: Well, one of the last ones is the Jeremiah O'Brien which is over in San Francisco, and that's been all refurbished. But apparently that wasn't even built in Richmond.

Foster: I didn't get to go on the ships. That was one thing I missed. All of this time I still haven't been on one. My husband just determined I was not going in the shipyard. So every time they would christen a ship, or get ready to christen a ship, something would happen and I wouldn't get to go. So the nearest I've gotten to the docks was to get round in the Canal Point over there, Yard Three, and see them getting ready to take them out of the keel they called it. At Yard Two I did see one when they were taking it up, but we didn't get to go on it. But I never did really get to go on the ships. I always wanted to see the inside of one, see what it was like.

Dunning: Actually, if you still have that curiosity, you can get on the Jeremiah O'Brien. They have it open several days

and weekends, and you can walk around with a tape. They explain every area of the ship.

Foster: Is that--?

Dunning: That's at Fort Mason in San Francisco.

Foster: I know where Fort Mason is, yes. I've taken the girls to Fort Mason to see the old big gun. One of the big--like Big Bertha, you know. When they were in school we carried them on a tour and we went down under the bridge and all back over in there.

Bringing up Grandnieces, Tracy and Denise

Dunning: Your life must have changed dramatically when you got custody of your two nieces when you turned fifty.

Foster: Well, it did, but I guess I was pretty well into it because I helped with my starting out with my younger baby sisters and brothers. There has been the niece that's keeping the baby for me this morning, she and these children's mother and that little boy that's in the picture there I showed you, and the other little girl. Her picture is on the wall back in the back room back there. There were four babies that were just like mine since the late forties. In fact, that one was born in '46. My husband and I had one or the other of those kids in and out of our house up until we took these two permanently.

Dunning: So it was really like having your own family?

Foster: Right. And just fortunately, cause my husband had never been around babies too much. But these babies in this family here, he even helped diaper them, and that's something he never fooled with. And he loved the little boy babies. He would just have them following him everywhere.

Yes, it was quite a change. It was like having children in the home all the time. I don't hardly know what it's like to not have children in the home. Out of the years that we were in the other house, there was three or four babies in and out there all the time, and then these two here, they initiated this home. They took it over.

So yes, it was quite a difference. We traveled with the kids. I had never traveled with children before. That's one thing I had never done and I wondered what it would be like--with a baby, too. We did it very successfully. About the time that we took the kids, we had a little bit more money to spend and we could take our time. We never drove at night hardly. We stayed in some of the best motels and hotels and went into the parks and different places and stayed. They gave us good accommodations for the children in all the better places that we went to to eat. It was just really enjoyable, having come to California out of the segregated terms that we came on. It really made you feel good when you went back and you could even take the little children and

sit down and eat anywhere you wanted to and get all kinds of accommodations. It was really quite a change.

Dunning: Do you tell these girls about your childhood and how it was different?

Foster: Yes.

Dunning: And do you think they understand?

Foster: No, because they say, "Oh, that was in the olden days you did that. It's not like that now." The generation gap is so different that's what they use on me. But I tell them there are some things that the generation gap can never change: the moral aspects of a human being and of your family, from your geneology wherever you came from shouldn't ever change. I don't think it should. That's the way I look at it. Because I know that was handed down to me from my grandparents. I don't wear high top boots, which they do anyway, and grass-swept skirts and all of that, but all of that stuff is coming back in a way of speaking.

Dunning: What skirts?

Foster: The grass-sweepers, that's what my father used to call them, grass-sweepers. But all of this stuff, it is gradually coming back and into the way of life we were talking to the young people. In fact, Sunday we had a revival, a youth revival at our church. They were talking to the young people about their carelessness nowadays. They don't think anything of out-of-wedlock

families and like that. That is one of the moral aspects that I think has really broken down.

As I heard a minister say, "I've studied the bible and I've looked and I've looked and I don't see nowhere yet where it said it was all right. It said marriage is very sacred." I think that family ties should be kept sacred and I think marriage should be held sacred. I don't say for any girl or any woman to stay in an abusive marriage, but I say work at it to try to keep it from being that way. You can make your marriage.

I think, as I remember back, I thought it was terrible if families quarreled because we were told that you just didn't do that. My granddaddy used to tell us, "Cats and dogs fight."

But it happened. But they made up. This lack of forgiveness nowadays, that's one thing the young people like. They're not very forgiving. They don't even say I'll forget it but I won't forgive it. I used to hear that said. But they don't even say that. They just don't forgive anymore. I think that's a great change from when I was coming on as a child.

Dunning: Do you have certain ambitions for your nieces?

Foster: Yes I do. I had, but more and more I'm beginning to kind of keep them to myself or pull away because I find the one thing in this new generation, you can't push. They're very, very, very stubborn about being pushed, and they speak it out very freely. Not only just mine,

but I hear it everywhere, "They wanted me to be this," or, "They wanted me to be that." I don't tell them I want them to be anything. I want the best for them, that's what I tell them.

I tried to prepare for them to get the best, just like for education I say to them, "If you get these things you can get some of the best. But I think you should get an understanding before you get any of it of why you're getting it and why you need it. If you understand those things or you understand why that we're encouraging you to do these things and want these things for you."

There are a lot of things that I went through that I wouldn't want them to have to go through with. For instance, being lacking in things. I tell them, "If you ever knew what it was to wear two dresses, have to wash one out and put the other one on. You would have a change of underclothes. You would have to wash your clothes at night and dry them on the back of a chair by the fire. Then you would understand what it's like to take care of things."

They don't like for you to tell them to reserve things. I get after them a lot of times about the way they abuse things and kick them around or throw them around, and they say to me, "Oh, well you can't hurt this and you can't hurt that."

I said, "No, it's not the matter of hurting it, but it's abusive use of it the way you do it, and eventually

it will become hurt if you kick your garments around and throw them around and they're untidy. You've got to wash them more. Well, that's the hurt that comes about."

"And start with little things like that." I tell them, "If you can't take care of little things, you can't take care of big things. You'll never get anything bigger. You have to replace the same thing all the time."

Like they get on me about the furnishings and things in the house. "Why, this is old, antique. We would like to have over-stuffed furniture. We would like to have this or have that."

I said, "You get it and get your house to put it in. I worked hard for this and I purchased it with the understanding that it would last. It will much outlast over-stuffed furniture and things like that. When it gets too antiquey for you, you get you a modern house and some modern furniture, because mine is staying right in here."

They see things as being made to use and they're going to wear out. Well, there's a difference in wear out and tear out with me. If you allow the baby to take casters, which we had some down here on the floor--there they are up on top of the T.V.--and she was headed dead for that coffee table to bang, bang. She finally got two of them and she was banging them together, and they're glass.

I said, "Now, they're either going to break in her hand and cut her hand, or she was going to get to that coffee table and break that glass or knock a hole in the furnishing. Don't let her play with those kind of things. Beat on this bench."

And she's found her a little trail now. When she can't get through here she goes on to get up there to that window sill. Eventually she'll get one of them in her hand and she'll hit the glass. These things here. That's why they're off of there now, because she just walks right over there. So I just took them off and I put them right up here where I think she can't reach them. Did you know she proved to me she can reach up there? She got on her tiptoes and stretched up here and got those things. So those are some of the things that you have to work on them about. The baby's not responsible. You have to be the responsible person.

That's what I tell the girl all the time, "You just allow her to make hard work for you and more work for you by not doing what you should do in time."

Dunning: Well, seventeen is pretty young to be a mom.

Foster: Well, she's eighteen now. But she was seventeen, you're right, when the baby was born. But you know, when I was eighteen I was married and I had learned a lot. But I knew a lot in a way and not too much for family maybe. But just by listening and taking heed to my mother I applied all of these things when the necessary time came for them.

Dunning: And she's probably learned an awful lot from you, too.

Foster: If she would just apply it. That's what I'm saying to her. No, she's a procrastinator, the biggest mother is. "I'll do it directly," "I'll get around to after a while," "I'm going to." But she never does it.

I end up having to go back the second, sometimes the third time, and then you're ready to scold them. And naturally at eighteen, she gets resentful of it. But you are your master as long as you can master, and when you can't master you need a master. That's the way I see it.

Special Ambitions

Dunning: Do you have any special ambitions now, things you would like to do or places you would like to go?

Foster: Oh yes. I just don't have enough money to do some of them. Right now my greatest ambition is to just be free to go when I want to go to do the things that I would want to do. I don't feel like I want to do a lot of exploring and spending, but right in California here there are a lot of things I would like to do. For instance, the seniors run excursions and bus trips and things like that. They go and lobby up at Sacramento. I would love to go to those kinds of things.

I have friends in Arizona at resorts. I would love to go down there for a vacation. More or less I would

go just to try to restore myself. I think the sunshine and the climate and everything would be good for me. I don't want to drive. I would like to go to Canada. That's one place I would like to go. This year I would have just loved to have gone to that expo.

I have some very good friends in Colorado. I would like to go there. That's a place I've always loved. There are just numerous places I would like to go. I promised one of my friends--they've got it so now it's just a hop, skip, and a jump to Hawaii, and I keep saying to her I'm going to go for an Easter vacation or Christmas or sometime vacation in Hawaii with them the next time they take one of these trips. There are usually about a dozen or fifteen of them get together and they go.

Dunning: Great fun.

Foster: Yes. I really would like to see Pearl Harbor. It's sad, but I've often thought about it. I would like to see Pearl Harbor. The Holy Lands I would probably like to see, but with all the new things that go on over there I don't want to go there. But yes, I would like to go from coast to coast. I don't have too much interest overseas, out of the country, but I would go.

Dunning: Do you see a time when your schedule will open up a little bit?

Foster: Yes. I'm just envisioning. I've got great faith. I don't know if my mother-in-law were deceased, or if her

niece would take her or something. That would be an opportunity for me because with the girls being of age now, the oldest one, any time now she could go. The baby girl I would like to stick with her another year or two years if I can. She's very ambitious and working, making her a little money and trying to save, and now she's going on to Heald College so she can get a better job.

So if she gets out in these next eighteen, twenty months, they guarantee jobs. She's taking computer and accounting, and the oldest one is taking secretarial and english courses right now, and shorthand. So they told them that they place practically all the students they turn out out at Heald College. In fact, they get on-the-job training right out of school. They tour different places.

So I'm hoping that they're going to get jobs and be on their own. The house, if they want to stay here, and they prove themselves that they can keep the house, I would just turn it over to them.

Dunning: And where would you go?

Foster: Oh, I would come home, but I mean I would just leave them.

Dunning: Oh, for a short period of time?

Foster: Yes, just let them housekeep. Just let them feel the pressure or the feeling of having to run a house. Yes, the saying used to be, just walk one mile in my shoes.

I would like to let them walk one mile. I sent the oldest one shopping yesterday to get me a small head of cabbage and a little box of cue-tips.

I gave her \$2.75 and I said, "Now a cabbage head, they're running around twenty-five cents a pound and up, so it may run around three pounds, maybe seventy-five cents."

And I had parked under a shade tree so comfortably, me and the baby in the car. She walked in the store and came out with me a head of chicory lettuce and these cue-tips. I noticed that bag was awfully flimsy when she was coming to the car with it, but I didn't say anything. I pitched it in the back of the car and we came on home. I brought the baby in the house. She brought it and laid it on the drainboard there.

I was sitting in the house for fifteen, twenty minutes, and I decided I'll go put my cabbage in water. I liked to crisp it. I walked in here and dumped the cabbage head out. Here's this head of chicory lettuce. I was fit to be tied.

I went in that room and I said to her, "Now I can see you housekeeping right now. Yes, you need to go to college. I'm glad you got in. And I hope they'll teach you the difference between vegetations."

Yes, a head of chicory lettuce. I'm sure she knows what a cabbage head is. She said she walked in there and she just looked up and she saw cabbage there and she just

gets this and puts it in a bag. I could see a head of butter lettuce, or romaine lettuce or something being different, but that.

Dunning: And you probably will still continue with the church? That would be an important activity?

Foster: Oh yes. I definitely will. That's the one thing that I've always made my business since I was a teenager, that no matter where I go I associate myself with the church and with Christian people. I've become affiliated with the church and I don't like to just go and sit. I like to work with the church people. I talk to some of the students since I was a teenager and worked with the young adults and youths, sang in the choir, and worked as an officer in the church ever since I've been in a church, and I'm sure I would continue to do that until--I hope I won't get too old to be useful.

Dunning: And how about your quilting?

Foster: Definitely. I just love it so much I'll be doing some kind of handcraft. I had a young man ask me yesterday, "Do you mean to tell me you didn't send a quilt to the state fair? You don't have a quilt up at the state fair?"

And I said, "No."

He said, "What's wrong with you? Why don't you get something ready and get it up there?"

I said, "Well, the young lady that had my quilts on exhibit downtown, she didn't even mention it, and I knew I wasn't going to be going."

He said, "I tell you, if you get something together next year I'll take it for you. I would like to take it. We're never going to let this thing die. We're going to keep Easter Hill seniors alive with their quilts."

Yes, I just love it just that well. I'm quilting a quilt in there now I've never seen one like before. It's a state map of Texas. It's nine maps of the state of Texas and it's got a great big star at the top of each map and it's got all the small towns and cities in it. It's embroidered in there, but it's lay work, the quilt is. And this woman, Mrs. White, her son won a prize, an award, in college, for drawing this map. So she decided that she wanted to preserve it and they turned it onto a quilt. I don't know if she's going to use it on a bed or on a wall or where.

Dunning: So have you done that quilt right from scratch?

Foster: No.

Dunning: Or you're doing the quilting part?

Foster: I'm quilting it, yes. You must see it before you leave. I'll let you take a look at it. I had her come over and she said, "I don't know how to quilt. I can't tell you how I want it quilted. You just use your imagination and you quilt it."

So we sat down and we looked it over and it was very obvious that we were going to have to work out a plan to quilt it by because there's no set pattern to go by.

Tracy came up with the idea of stripes, like the flag, and I thought, "Oh, I don't know how that's going to look. We'll have to go both ways on the stripes."

She said, "No, the idea is to leave the stripes like stripes in the flag. They're going like this and then the stars right over there. So you've got the stars and the stripes."

Dunning: Sounds great.

Foster: Yes. She just got it. Tracy's an artist though, the baby girl is. She started out in art at four or five years old, and the first thing I ever saw that child draw, she stood up in front of that television and saw Chico and the Man. She went and got her a paper and she got down there on that floor, and she came up with Chico with this great big straw hat on his head.

My minister came in and I showed it to him. He said, "Oh, Tracy, you're too much."

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Foster: He took it and he looked it over and he said, "I mean that. I'm not kidding. We're going to do something with this child. She's gifted."

And do you know we took her to the gifted program and she was accepted. So the lady took her right in and they gave her an art certificate to go to the Richmond Art Center for six months. After that we started paying for them. My husband kept carrying her.

She just got to be real good, so she drew the Christmas card for the Children's Hospital when she was twelve, and she won the award out of fifty-two kids. She drew the little drummer boy leading his donkey and it is the cutest thing. That's for the handicapped kids. Children's Hospital is still using it, they tell me. They just put on there how old she was. But they use that Christmas card. We saved us some souvenirs of it. When you come back again I'll show those to you. Now her other art is--well, she does some kind of writing that she's good at. She likes to do that.

Dunning: Like with calligraphy, or--?

Foster: Yes. She's not taking up her drawing too much right now. She kind of dropped it. But she's off into typing and a lot of different things. And quilt, piece quilt, sew. She can make her clothes, but after they came out of junior high they didn't want to make clothes anymore. Denise doesn't care for sewing but she can. They both have quilts. I've quilted them for them. They help. They're helping to quilt that quilt in there now. But they both pieced their first quilts at seven and eight years old.

They made their first doll clothes at six and seven. We came in and they had taken this nice big piece of material of mine and drew a round circle and cut a hole in it and then punched two little holes in it and put it on their doll. It wouldn't go over the head of one of them so they cut it down the back and punched holes with the scissors. That baby girl sewed a button on hers and she sewed it on right. The oldest one, she tried to sew hers on and she kept going over the button, you know. But Tracy went through that button. But the button hole they just punched it in. They didn't work the button hole.

My mother was still living then. That was in '75, and that just tickled her. She came here, she said, "Now I've seen everything."

Dunning: Certainly you've been a good model for them.

Foster: Well, I've tried to. I made all of their clothes from the time that they were with me up until they just got too uppity to wear them, I say. But I make them do a lot of knitting and things now, and they sew some of their clothes. They cut off, alter, and do things like that.

Denise was in several musical plays in the school and church, in fact, she started out to play the clarinet in the Cortez School choir and at Adams Junior High. She was one of the lead singers in the school choir. She played the part of Dorothy in The Wiz and toured schools in Berkeley and around. She was videotaped in The Wiz.

Denise still plays piano in the church choir for the youth. Denise went to musical school at the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts. She studied piano, guitar, and took a vocal course, and played the clarinet. She likes show biz and performing.

Closing Remarks

Dunning: Do you have anything else you would like to add at this time, either about your own life or about Richmond?

Foster: Well, I don't know. I guess much has happened--Richmond sold itself on me with its climate. That's one thing as far as living in California is concerned. I never lived any other place. I don't say Richmond has the best image, but it's the best place. That's what I'll say. As the saying goes, everybody's mom is the best mom, so my hometown is the best town. I like that about it. And I guess I could say for my home.

I always wanted my own home. I wanted to settle and live in my own home. I've never been much for transience, roaming from place to place. I wanted to settle and be in one place. Since I owned my first home in Richmond, that has made Richmond great for me. It's kind of like not knowing any place else, and not in particular wanting to. I feel like after seventy years of age I don't want to move.

I'm not one of these status quo type of persons that just anything will do. If something better came along or I saw a reason for uprooting and going someplace else, yes, I would, but as of now I'm not dissatisfied and I don't see anything better to launch out after. I don't anticipate taking a job. I don't think I'll ever be able to hold a city job anymore. Nobody would hire me.

Yes, I would like to be in my own business. I've always been ambitious for a business. I had my own business at one time. I told you about it. I had two little businesses, in fact. I started a little business in my home. I baked fruitcakes and sold them for years in the fall. I just would do it seasonally. And I've sewed for years. I had my own clients. So I could make a living if I had to right now. I tell everybody.

People say, "What would you do if your social security was suddenly cut off?"

I wouldn't hang myself. I wouldn't jump off of the Empire State Building like they say people did in the thirties and the late twenties. No, I could continue on. I don't sit around and wait for things to come to me. I've always ventured out to get what I wanted, or if I seen an opportunity to better my condition, I did just that. So I think I could readjust if I had to.

Dunning: Well, you certainly are adaptable.

Foster: Yes, I've tried to be. I remember my husband said to me when we left Texas coming to California, "You know, you

got to make up your mind now that you can't make a trail from here to Texas every year." Because he knew that we were really family orientated, my family was. Much more so than his.

He didn't know the Foster family too well. His mother raised him away from his father because she married again, and the families that she married into, they were not very close or family orientated.

So she said to me one time, "Oh, it looks likes to me when something happens to one of you, all of you just go to pieces or something."

It's not really that, but we're just that closely connected. We're very concerned. If something happens to one it happens to all. So he was reminding me of this in the event that something happened. But it so happened God fixed it so all my family followed. I came after my brother, and the one sister that lives here now, she was in Fresno before I came to Richmond. But all of them finally came. My brother left from here and I stayed, and all my family ended up right here in Richmond or in some parts of California, San Francisco, San Jose, Fresno, and around. So we all got close together. So it worked out good in that way for me.

My mother and dad had their home and they raised their last three sons up. Those kids were small when I left. They finished school and the oldest one of those boys, my brother Dan, he came here and started his family. He went back and went to Chicago and stayed a

number of years and he remarried and came back to California. He lives in Oakland now.

He has some property up at Clear Lake. That's where we went one summer since my husband passed. I carried Mama up there for her vacation. That's where I would like to go in the next two weeks. Steal off up there for a weekend.

Dunning: Well, if at a later time anything comes to your mind that you think should be recorded, feel free to give me a call, and sometime I really would like to go through some of your old photographs with you.

Foster: I'm going to get them out. In fact, I have them pretty well correlated now. I had quite a scattered deal when I first talked to you.

Dunning: Yes. Just from looking at the few that you brought out the last time, that would be really useful.

Foster: I've got scads of them that are in bags that haven't even been put in the books.

Dunning: And I would also like next time to take some pictures of you for your volume.

Foster: Okay. And my baby Marlana.

Dunning: Oh, absolutely. In fact, we can have a whole family.

Thank you very much.

Quilt display weaves colorful history of Richmond

By Richard Spencer
The Tribune

For Selena Foster and Vera Jones Bailey, quilting has been a source of enjoyment throughout their lives.

Now their artistic endeavors are being honored in the Richmond Museum's display, "To Keep Somebody Warm — Richmond's History in Quilts."

Drawing record crowds since it opened April 5, the display features the works of Foster, Bailey and some 14 other quilters and quilting groups, whose expert works range from creations with simple patterns involving 400 pieces, to elaborate ones with 5,000.

"Quilting is a great joy and a pleasure; it's creative," said Selena Foster, born in 1916 in Cherokee County, Texas, one of nine children. "I take my nothing, and make something out of it."

Copying off her grandmothers and threading their needles, she learned quilting before she was 9,

and by 16 had acquired professional skills.

Foster, the chairwoman of Easter Hill Quilters, came here in 1943 with her husband, who went to work in the shipyards. She took a job in the Defense Diner on Cutting Boulevard, but kept her needles sharp.

Widowed, she augments retirement working as a seamstress and making quilts by hand and machine.

"I've two daughters, a 98-year-old mother-in-law, and a grandbaby that I help," Foster said. "I'm their everything, so I have to find time for quilting. I can sit down in the morning over a cup of coffee and quilt. I can do it in the evening. I can get up and miss breakfast any morning and quilt."

She estimates she has pieced more than 50 quilts, and helped with countless others. Examples of her work keep people warm

See **QUILT**, Page 2



By Richard Spencer/The Tribune

Vera Jones Bailey with some of her quilt projects.

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By Richard Spencer/The Tribune

Selena Foster of Richmond has been a quilter for more than 40 years.

Quilt

Continued from Page 1
throughout the West.

"When I was a child, people made their own bedding," Foster said, "and today I charge from a steal to a giveaway to make a quilt, like \$150 to \$300. I love doing it, and I'm staying with it. It's artistic expression, and I've got a backlog of orders."

Chevron USA and the recreation and parks department provided major funding for the show, which runs through June 22, and includes the film "Quilts in Women's Lives."

Like Foster, Kansas-born Vera Jones Bailey started sewing almost as soon as she could hold a needle, making doll clothes, and joining her mother and sister to make quilts and comforters.

"There used to be a saying," said Bailey, born in 1905, "that if you made a quilt a year, you would have enough bedding. I can remember my grandmother hunting out small needles for me."

Her grandparents lived in a sod house on the prairie, and today Bailey still sews for herself,

making gifts, Christmas tree decorations and sweaters.

Moving to Richmond from Missouri in 1942, she and her husband went to work in the shipyards, where she spent three years as a sheet metal worker.

"Over the years I did a lot of embroidery," said Bailey, who raised three children. "I sewed for my children, and once made a quilt as a gift for a teacher when she got my balky son to go to school."

"I've tried so hard to teach some other people to quilt," she added, "but haven't had much success. I think women are too busy today earning a living."

Machine-made quilts, she said, don't seem right, but lap quilting she could do all day.

Bailey has sewn more than 20 quilts, and given many, including some her mother made, to her children and grandchildren when they married.

A shoulder injury followed by arthritis almost made her stop quilting, but she picked up her needle to teach members of a

quilting group at St. Luke's Methodist Church.

Years ago, Bailey recalled, the price of a quilt was based on how much thread was used. The going rate was \$1 a spool, and a quilt ran \$100 to \$150.

"One of the most exciting parts of the exhibit is peeking into quilter's lives through their displays," said museum spokeswoman Kathleen Rupley.

A museum program gives a detailed biography of each quilter and a short synopsis of that biography is provided on the museum walls next to each display quilt.

"The rich history of the Bay Area is reflected in the quilters' comments, and the program notes go back almost 100 years into the backgrounds of these talented people."

Selena Foster is personally delighted to be involved in this renewed interetingg in quilting. "I think youngsters are picking up quilting," she said. "I think it's returning. To me, it's on the way back. Maybe it never really went away."

Quilt exhibit to feature films and speakers

RICHMOND — If you haven't seen "To Keep Somebody Warm," the city's history in quilts, this Sunday would be a good day to visit the Richmond Museum because it is the start of National Museum Week.

The quilt exhibit, which continues Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays through June 22, features the works of local artisans.

From Richmond, they are: Vera Jones Bailey, Mollie Bowie, Ethel Carrigan, Selena Foster, Savannah Hadley, Cordelia and Milton Hardy, Lou Allie Heath, Georgianna Beck Lasater, Matti Beckett Mann, Anna Philippi, Clovice Walker, St. Lukes Methodist Quilters, and Easter Hill Methodist Seniors.

The quilts of former Pt. Richmond resident Becky Schaefer, now of Marin County, also are on

display along with those by Alex Anderson of Pinole and Carol Schwartz of El Cerrito.

Three films on quilting will be shown this Friday and Saturday during the museum's regular hours of 1 to 4 p.m.

They are: "Quilting Women," "Anonymous Was a Woman," and "Quilts in Women's Lives."

June 1 will be "Quilt Sharing Sunday, when quilt owners can learn more about the subject from textile experts Inez Brooks-Myers, associate curator of the Oakland Museum's history department, and Juli Silber, curator of the Espirit collection of Amish quilts.

Admission to the museum, located at 400 Nevin Ave., is free. For more information, call 235-7387.

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Remember When...

saw Richmond for the first time

Nanci L. Valcke
respondent

RICHMOND — Selena Foster, 74, has never forgotten her first day in Richmond, nor has she ever wanted to live anywhere else.

It was 1 p.m. Jan. 24, 1944, when she and her husband, Marvin Foster, both natives of Texas, drove their '35 Chevy coupe laden with their belongings into town.

They drove up and down San Pablo Avenue, and up and down Cutting Boulevard, and up and down Macdonald Avenue in search of Earliest Street and Selena Foster's brother.

"We met lots of people who lived in that area, but they hadn't lived there very long and they only knew how to get to and from the shipyards, not the names of the streets," Selena Foster recalls. To make matters worse, there were no street signs.

It was 5 p.m. before they finally knocked on the door of her brother's apartment.

Housing was very hard to find and the Housing Authority kept a close eye on the number of people in each apartment. Foster remembers the housing authority patrolling the neighborhoods and even following mail carriers and checking letters to see how many names there were for each apartment.

Risked eviction

Foster took great care never to be in her brother's apartment during the day, because if she were found, her brother would be evicted.

"They (the Housing Authority) were making it so hot for us we had to get out," Foster said.

So in April, the Fosters took the little money they had and bought a trailer. "It was compact," Foster remembers. "And it didn't have (toilet) facilities." Although they would later buy a larger, more comfortable trailer, they would live in the trailer park and use the park's facilities for the war's duration.

While her husband worked in the Kaiser shipyards, Foster worked in the Defense Diner at 501 Cutting Blvd., "right out in front of Ship-

yard 1," she recalled. Every morning she walked to work down the railroad tracks from the trailer park on Wright Avenue. And she wasn't afraid. "I would have much rather walked the street in those days than I would now," she said.

Foster took pride in her work and her appearance, showing up every day in a clean, crisp uniform.

And one evening, when the fountain area was overflowing with customers, it paid off. The owner's wife came in and noticed Foster. "Who's this girl over here?" she asked her husband. "Where did you get her?"

"Does she know anything about the fountain?" she asked.

"She seems to handle it very well, from what I can see," the owner answered his wife.

The owner's wife then asked Foster if she would like to have the fountain job, overseeing the other women and running the doughnut machine. The answer was yes.

"I saw so many doughnuts! I said, 'I don't think I'll ever eat another cake donut,'" Foster said, laughing.

Trailer park closed

When the war ended, her husband took a job in San Francisco at the Cadillac dealership on Van Ness.

The trailer park was closed after the war so the Fosters moved their trailer to what is now El Cerrito Plaza. "My trailer used to sit right where Capwell's store is today," she said. The diner also changed ownership, and Foster left shortly after.

Things happened pretty fast after the war. The Fosters sold their trailer and bought a house on 29th Street, where they stayed for 17 years. Then they moved around the corner, and have been there ever since.

Foster considers herself a true Richmond resident, preferring the city to anywhere else in the Bay Area. She means it when she says, "When nighttime comes, bring me back to

Richmond."

Foster opened her own little restaurant in Oakland in 1947, a small place that she and her mother-in-law ran with the help of one other woman. She called it Selena's Kitchen.

But she recalls with a hint of sadness, "I didn't keep it very long, and it was doing real well, too."

Because they had only one car between them, and the supply needs of the restaurant and the commuting needs of her husband conflicted, Foster gave up her little restaurant in 1948.

She stayed home for a while before going back to work, but the new job didn't work out. The restaurant owner served food Foster could not bring herself to serve. She told him, "If you serve something to one of these people and make them sick, like ptomaine poisoning, I'm going to be just as guilty as you are."

She quit.

Her next job was at the Eastman Factory in Oakland, which made stationery products, running the cafeteria. She was given an account first and then later an allowance to buy food. She was expected to clear the cost of the food and her salary from what she charged the factory workers. All her past experience cooking in cafeterias paid off. She was earning more money than many of the women in the factory.

In 1966 she faced a major challenge — surgery for a ruptured disc and being told she might never walk again. She returned to her youthful hobby of quilting.

While recovering from surgery and learning to walk and use her hand again, she pieced together a quilt. Named "Hearts and Gizzard" the quilt was displayed at the Richmond auditorium and then traveled to Washington, D.C. where it was displayed at the Mary McLeod Bethune Library.

Using scraps of material to piece quilts together is symbolic of the philosophy Foster lived by. "I take your nothing and make something out of it," she said.

Judith K. Dunning

Interviewer/Editor Regional Oral History Office since 1982.
Specialty in community and labor history.
Project Director, "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of
Richmond, California."

Previous oral history projects: Three Generations of Italian
Women in Boston's North End; World War I and II shipyard workers
at the Charlestown Navy Yard, Boston; and Textile mill workers in
Lowell, Massachusetts.

Photography exhibitions: "Lowell: A Community of Workers,"
Lowell, MA 1981-1984 (travelling).
Fishermen by Trade: On San Francisco Bay with the Ghio Brothers"
Richmond Museum, 1988.

Play: "Boomtown" based on the oral histories of shipyard
workers, produced by San Francisco Tale Spinners Theater, 1989.

Member Richmond Arts Commission, 1988-1990.

Currently adapting Richmond community oral histories into large
print books for California adult literacy programs.

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